

Canyon views

Lyons mom shares thoughts about kids' online education

JOLENE KINCAID
COMMENTARY

I never thought nine years ago I would be writing to the local paper about our family's experience with the online public school our children attend, but when Oregon Connections Academy (ORCA) asked me to share my thoughts, I was happy to tell our story.

I also know summer is a good time for families to consider options for their student's school. When my friends ask me about Oregon Connections Academy, I tell them our experience, but also encourage them to explore other choices. Maybe this column will be informative for other families, too, as they begin their journey.

We started with ORCA when my son, Garrett, was midway through first grade, and my daughter, Sidney, was still in kindergarten. Garrett will be a junior this fall, and Sidney will be a sophomore. Oregon Connections Academy is the best school for our family, but we know it doesn't work for everyone.

When we first came to ORCA, our students were attending a private school, and it just wasn't working for us. The kids were exhausted by mid-afternoon, and we had so little family time in the evenings as we rushed to deal with homework, dinner, and bedtime by a decent time. All this only to get up and do it all over again.

The children didn't present behavior problems, and they weren't struggling academically, but we felt they were still slipping through the cracks and not getting the attention they needed. We didn't blame the teachers; it was just hard to provide individual time for every student when some had discipline issues.

I was worried that if I homeschooled, I would not teach them the right things. It was then that a parent with students currently attending Oregon Connections Academy told me about the school. I did my own research about the program and we decided to try this online public school rather than homeschool.

Right away ORCA was a great fit for our students. The lessons meet state standards and they're already provided, and state licensed teachers are there for instruction and support, so you never feel like you're alone.

Over the years we've especially loved the balance of flexibility and accountability at the school. ORCA is truly what you want to make of it. For example, your students can attend some or all of the interactive online classes they call LiveLesson sessions, though we highly recommend attending LiveLesson sessions regularly.

Students and parents can get as much help and feedback as they need from teachers. We have had such a great experience with everyone, from the enrollment and tech support staff, to the teachers and administrators.

Every ORCA family is different, but we have a daily routine for school: we



Jolene, Garrett and Sidney Kincaid of Lyons share thoughts about their experiences with online education.

COURTESY OF OREGON CONNECTIONS ACADEMY

wake up pretty much the same time every day, have breakfast, get dressed, and begin school. The kids do better when we complete most core classes before lunch, and then work on other classes, or projects that take a little longer, after lunch. My kids love the fact that when they're finished for the day, they're done — no evening homework.

They enjoy having downtime and through the years my children have had lots of socialization opportunities. The kids have participated in dance, they're active in their church youth group, community service, youth sports, and enjoy 4-H archery. We have friends in the ORCA online school community, as well as homeschool families. Sometimes we get together to just hang out, and other times we go on our own mini field trips.

Both my kids also enjoy Oregon Connections Academy's fun and educational field trips. There are dozens of these events around the state throughout the school year and families can choose to attend or not. Our family highly recommends attending field trips. We love the opportunity to meet ORCA teachers and other families.

The curriculum at Oregon Connections Academy is top notch, including an incredible variety of electives. One of the things I love the most about ORCA is the staff is constantly coming up with ways to make the school even better. We were thrilled when the school started an annual prom two years ago and added

student government last year. My son participated in both additions and feels they make him even more a part of the school.

The flexible schedule with online learning has been really helpful. We like that with ORCA, if archery runs late, or something else is going on, and we get home later than usual, we can sleep in a little. That way there is no need to rush out the door to make it to class on time. One year, when my kids got really sick, we kept up with school by having them do a couple hours of lessons, rest, then do a few more. In a regular bricks-and-mortar school, they would have fallen so far behind, it would have taken weeks for them to catch up with their classmates.

I asked my children to talk about Oregon Connections Academy and this is what Sidney wrote:

"I like how the curriculum is challenging and engaging. I can get one-on-

one time to talk with a teacher when I need help. In bricks-and-mortar schools, sometimes a student can be overlooked and never get the help they need to succeed. The teachers care about students learning at ORCA, and are always there to lend a hand. I never feel rushed to complete an assignment."

Here is the feedback I received from Garrett:

"The program is very flexible for different schedules. All of the teachers are very helpful, and work with each student

to try and help them succeed. The school is very welcoming to new students, and will help you get on your feet. ORCA provides opportunities for growth for students of all grades and educational levels."

If you do try Oregon Connections Academy, it can be a big adjustment initially for students and parents alike, but don't give up too soon and do reach out for help. There is so much support available, you just have to ask. ORCA connects new Learning Coaches — parents or other responsible adults — who have questions or are struggling with experienced Learning Coaches for assistance.

Anyone interested in making a change in their child's education this fall, now is the perfect time to study the alternatives — charter schools, private schools, homeschooling and more. I encourage those who are curious about Oregon Connections Academy to check out one of the in-person or online information sessions going on this summer. You can find out more at www.OregonConnectionsAcademy.com/Events

Jolene Kincaid or Lyons is the parent of two Oregon Connections Academy students.

Enrollment is now open for the 2017-18 school year. For information, contact ORCA at www.OregonConnectionsAcademy.com or by calling (800) 382-6010.

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