

PA Cyber student Eva Heelan, with her parents Craig and Ramona



THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION

PA Cyber's rigorous, accredited online program helps students thrive, while parents participate in each step of the academic journey.

by **MATT COSENTINO** photo by **JODY ROBINSON**

On "Fun Fact Fridays" at Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, or PA Cyber,

students are encouraged to share interesting tidbits with their virtual class, and the presentations often lead to lively discussions among the group. Eva Heelan, a rising seventh grader who lives in Allentown, always looks forward to the weekly exercise. Her enthusiasm can be felt throughout her house.

"I work in the basement and she's above me in our kitchen, and I can hear her loud and clear saying, 'It's Fun Fact Friday,' at the top of her lungs," says Eva's father, Craig. "I do presentations for a living—I'm in corporate training—and for her to have that confidence is huge. I was never an outgoing person until much later in life, but she's able to speak in front of people at her age without being nervous at all."

Eva's confidence and eloquence are some of the many benefits she has experienced since enrolling at PA Cyber four years ago in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. When her public school went remote, Craig

and Ramona, Eva's mother, were seeking an alternative and discovered other public school options. They found PA Cyber, which is fully accredited and open to students from kindergarten through 12th grade.

"She's a smart kid, and what she was doing in class [in public school] was basic," Craig says. "I don't blame the local educators, because they were thrown into a virtual environment and that's not what they had been doing for the 20 years prior. So we decided to try [PA Cyber], and we haven't looked back. It's been an amazing experience."

Eva was hesitant at first because she didn't want to leave her friends, but she adapted quickly to the new educational model and has thrived at PA Cyber. She started with the blended classroom, or asynchronous option, in which students work when and where they choose but have one



live classroom experience per week. She found the virtual classroom to be more suitable, and she now has a standard schedule in which she interacts with classmates and state-certified teachers in real-time classes every day.

Her father appreciates that, unlike in her home district, Eva is given regular homework, projects, and writing assignments to complete in both her core subjects and electives. She has risen to the challenge of the academic rigors.

"She's been doing really well," Craig adds. "In fact, the school has allowed her to interview for the gifted and talented program. Her lowest grade this past year was a 99. She's quite proud of that, and she worked hard for it, so she deserves credit."

One concern that is often raised with an online school is how it may affect socialization. PA Cyber has nine regional offices to promote in-person enrichment opportunities, including one in Allentown near the Heelans' home. The school offers field trips, music lessons, art and STEM workshops, dances and proms, graduation ceremonies, and even international trips.

Eva became interested in Greek mythology and started a club with several friends she made at school. She attended trips to Harrisburg and Dorney Park, and outside of school she furthers her socialization by participating in swimming and dance.

On top of being able to keep up with friends, Eva has become more mature and responsible in terms of managing all of her schoolwork. A school counselor connects with the family every month, which is particularly helpful in the event of any concerns or missteps.

"That kind of connectivity is so important, and it allows my daughter and I to talk about school and other things," Craig says.

"It's not forced or disciplinary; it's on an even playing field. I wish I had that opportunity with my two older children, and PA Cyber is the only reason I've gotten it."

Eva's parents are waiting to see if she wants to continue at PA Cyber for high school;

she has shown no interest in changing course. Craig believes any families who discover PA Cyber will experience a similar response.

"With all of the funding conversations going on with traditional schools, this is a viable option to anybody," he says. "If your local district is not doing what you need them to do, or if you need virtual to suit whatever needs you have, this is an incredible option. ... It's an amazing school." ■

➔ **For more information about Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, call (888) 722-9237 or visit PACyber.org.**