For online students, Wyoming testing can be more of a haul

PAWS testing concludes this week

When it comes to taking the statewide exam, most Wyoming students don't have to think about traveling.

The thick test packets get plopped on their desks, along with bubble sheets and No. 2 pencils sharpened to perfection, and they are ready to go.

But for some students, it's not that simple.

Tayla Thomas is a 10-year-old sixth-grader at Wyoming Connections Academy, one of three virtual schools in the state.

On a normal day, Tayla starts school at 7 a.m. She walks to the kitchen table, opens her Macbook and logs on to class. Tayla's teacher, Shannon Skelcher, meanwhile, logs on from Cheyenne.

Tayla completes her modules, which might consist of reading, videos and some comprehension questions. When she's finished the day's agenda items, that's it -- she's done. It's usually about noon.

But at the beginning of the month, it was testing day for Tayla, so her mom drove her across Casper to the Hilton Garden Inn.

Once there, Tayla took a seat in a conference room with about 20 other students, some whom she knew. It was 9 a.m. She finished six hours later.

For virtual learners like Tayla, that's usually the protocol.

Assistant Principal Mike Lunde said the school finds nearby testing locations and has someone proctor the statewide exam, called the Proficiency Assessment of Wyoming Students, or PAWS.

When the exam concludes by week's end, some 49,000 students across the state will have taken it. The students, in grades 3-8, will have been tested in reading, math and science.

This year makes the third year that students took the test since it was aligned to the Common Core State Standards, which lay out what students must know in each grade. But
it was the first year students took the test since it has fully reflected what is taught in Common Core.

Tayla said she had some difficulty in math, but she breezed through the other subjects. It was the third year since she’s been at Wyoming Connections Academy that she’s taken the exam.

Tayla came to the virtual school from Ft. Caspar Academy.

Her mother, Stacey Thomas, said she decided to enroll Tayla in the school because she wanted to have more involvement in her education.

She said she thought about homeschooling in the past, but didn't want to do it on her own.

"Growing up, we knew people who were home-schooled who didn't finish," she said.

She and her husband didn't want that to happen to their daughter.

But after hearing about Connections Academy, and learning that it didn't have a daily class-time requirement like other virtual schools, they decided it was a good match.

The transition was a little difficult at first. Not being around other kids as much was one challenge. But it became less of an issue after Tayla enrolled in a physical education class through the YMCA and a science program through The Science Zone.

Tayla says she likes the pace of the school.

"I like that you're not wasting about an hour for recess or an hour for lunch," she said. "That's pretty convenient."

The limited distractions and flexibility have allowed her to finish her educational technology class weeks early.

While the ability to learn from home allows some of her classmates across the state to do coursework in pajamas, the practice is strictly prohibited in the Thomas house.

The mother and daughter laugh when its brought up.

The logic is simple: You wouldn't wear pajamas to school, they say, so why should virtual school be any different?