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Olympic hopefuls go for gold with virtual school

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(BPT) - Thirteen year-old Vincent Zhou is the 2013 U.S. Figure Skating Junior Men's National Champion. He dreams of one day representing the United States in the Olympics. Zhou, of Southern California, is a ninth-grader at Capistrano Connections Academy, where, despite his rigorous training schedule, he also excels off the ice, earning straight A's in all subject areas and earning the Presidential Award for Educational Excellence.

Zhou has a training secret weapon, one he shares with many of the country's most promising young Olympic hopefuls: online learning. Schools that leverage online learning, such as [Connections Academy](#), full-time virtual schools, and new blended options, such as Nexus Academy schools, help students like Zhou and other young athletes juggle schoolwork and their demanding training and competition schedule. With online education, these world-class athletes no longer have to choose between following their Olympic dreams and getting a top-quality public education.

Nationwide, a record number of K-12 students are getting their public educations virtually: more than 300,000 K-12 students in the U.S. attended school virtually during the 2012-13 school year and at least 24 states and Washington, DC have blended online/on-site schools, according to the latest Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning report. By 2019, 50 percent of all high school courses will be delivered online, according to Disrupting Class authors Clayton M. Christensen and Michael B. Horn.

But the online learning trend is even more pronounced in the world of elite amateur athletics, where young competitors have to practice for multiple hours every day and travel around the world for competitions - while still doing their ABCs. 'Virtual school is especially well suited to student athletes who desire to compete at the highest level in their sport, yet do not want to compromise on their academics,' observes Dr. Patricia Hoge, executive vice president of curriculum and instruction for Connections Academy. 'In the short term, virtual schools offer the flexibility athletes and their families need. But even more important, in the longer term, quality virtual public schools deliver a world-class education that will serve the athletes beyond their athletic careers.'

Online learning students with Olympic aspirations include:

Figure skater Vincent Zhou -The 2013 U.S. Figure Skating Junior Men's National Champion, 2012 Novice Men's National Champion, and 2011 Intermediate Men's National Champion, Zhou is the youngest Intermediate Men's national champion and the youngest Junior Men's national champion in U.S. Figure Skating history. He is also the youngest U.S.A. team member on the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 U.S. Figure Skating national teams. Winning three consecutive national championships, at three different levels, is unprecedented in U.S. men's figure skating.

Snowboarder Alicia Tong - Seventeen year-old Tong, a native of Eden Prairie, Minn., is the

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nation's number-two ranked snowboarder in the women's youth division of the United States of America Snowboard Association (USASA). This talented and versatile rider competes in all six snowboard disciplines: slalom, grand slalom, halfpipe, slopestyle, boardercross and rail jam. In the 2012 USASA Snowboard National Championships, Tong finished sixth overall. She has competed in 26 competitions over the course of the last season, and brought home a total of three gold medals, 11 silver medals and seven bronze medals. Alicia is an 11th grader at Minnesota's MTS Minnesota Connections Academy.

Ice hockey player Jaiden Forrest - Forrest is a 15 year-old ice hockey stand-out and sophomore at Nexus Academy of Grand Rapids, a 'blended' high school that combines face-to-face and online learning. This young Michigan resident has, for the past three years, played for the Lansing Spartans girls' 16U travel team, an elite girls' hockey team coached by 1988 Olympic hockey player and 17-year NHL veteran Kevin Miller. She has led the team in goals and assists all three years, and this year alone has played 42 out of 48 games, scoring 30 goals, and contributing 23 assists. This talented and versatile young skater can play virtually any position on the team - except for goalie - and has shown such promise that she was invited in the summer of 2013 to attend the U.S.A. National Player Development camp, an important stepping stone for her to achieve her goal of representing the U.S. at the Olympics on the U.S. Women's National Hockey Team.

While many athletes choose online learning, virtual and blended school options are a great fit for all types of students - those who simply were not thriving in the traditional classroom, are ahead or behind their peers academically, or want increased personalization or flexibility. In most states, virtual and blended school information sessions are going on now for parents and students to learn more. In states where virtual and blended public schools are not available, there are tuition-based virtual private school options.

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