



Taylor Barnes
SAINT PETERSBURG CHRISTIAN SCHOOL
Saint Petersburg, Florida

Taylor Barnes has her sights set on middle school and the opportunities it offers: volleyball, cheerleading, dance, just to start. She's showing excitement at school again, to the relief of her mother, who still thinks about the serious health threats Taylor has overcome in her young life.

Taylor's mother, Shannon Coates, had never thought private school would be an option – she went through public schools and her mother was a respected administrator in the Pinellas County school district – but each passing day affirms the decision she made five years ago. Now that her daughter has recovered from brain surgery in the fourth grade and surmounted a challenging academic environment upon her return, Ms. Coates remains committed to keeping her daughter in the private school environment that has been critical to her success.

"It's the best thing for her," Ms. Coates says, referring to Taylor's time at St. Petersburg Christian School, where she's in the fifth grade. "Now she is ready. She's been able to do all the things I had in school."

It wasn't easy getting there, and the path Shannon chose still sometimes surprises her. By the time Taylor started kindergarten, the Pinellas school district had opened its schools to a myriad of options as it came out from under a federal desegregation order.

Shannon Coates picked her top five choices – magnet and fundamental schools. "The best," she says. She didn't get a single one. Her choice was sending her then-5-year-old daughter, who suffered from asthma, on a bus for miles during an hour-long trip to school, and it was an option she was unwilling to take. A friend told her about a private school run by a former Pinellas County school teacher, Yvonne Reed-Clayton, known for her savvy in educating young children. "Private school was something that never came to my mind," Ms. Coates says. But she made the leap of faith, and she has never regretted it.

Taylor consistently scored high on the Stanford Achievement Test and, as a kindergartner, read at a second-grade level. She stayed at Yvonne C. Reed Christian School through the third-grade, when Ms. Coates began searching for a school that might encourage Taylor's budding creativity. She discovered Classical Christian School for the Arts just north of St. Petersburg, where Taylor's performing-arts talents flourished.

As the school year progressed, however, Taylor got sick. She suffered from seizures before doctors found that her brain stem was crowding her spinal cord. She needed surgery, which ultimately corrected the problem. But she missed nearly three months of school.

By the end of the school year, administrators wanted to retain Taylor in the fourth grade. Such a move would have devastated her, Ms. Coates says. "Everybody would know she repeated." She decided to place Taylor in the renowned Academy Prep of St.

Petersburg for her fifth-grade year, but the challenging environment soon took its toll on Taylor, particularly in math. While she tested into the sixth-grade at the Pinellas school district by the end of the year, her mother had to decide what was best. She made Taylor repeat the fifth grade this year, and this time at St. Petersburg Christian School.

"It was not easy for me," Coates says. "I know how hard it was for her. But I wanted her to get comfortable and I wanted her to enjoy school."

Immediately, the results were clear: Taylor has made the honor roll twice; she joined the school band and learned to play the trumpet; her math skills improved and she started taking Spanish.

Her teachers have taken notice, too, noting how skillfully Taylor can express herself in dance and is always eager to raise her hand during classroom discussions.

"She works hard in everything she does," says Kelsey Bennett, one of Taylor's teachers. "She takes her time to make sure everything is right." Taylor looks forward to coming to school, where, she says, "everyone is nice and no one laughs at you." Her mother looks forward to the future. With the help of the Step Up For Students Scholarship, Ms. Coates says she's been able to find the right school for her child, even when rough times forced her to make difficult decisions. Her daughter is thriving because of that opportunity and she says she'll do whatever she can to ensure Taylor remains on this path. "I have to do what's best for her," she says.

About St. Petersburg Christian School

St. Petersburg Christian School was the first Christian elementary school in St. Petersburg to receive accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Today, the school enrolls students in grades K-8 and fosters a rigorous academic environment that also encourages the fine arts. While a ministry of Suncoast Cathedral, the school serves children from more than 120 churches and from many nationalities. And, despite a challenging curriculum, its students tend to score above the national average of their peers on the Stanford Achievement Test. Tuition ranges from around \$5,800 in kindergarten to around \$6,800 for grades 7 and 8.