PUBLIC SCHOOLS
CATCH ONLINE FEVER

Anna Babcock, a 10th-grader in Evergreen Public Schools' online IQ Academy learning program, prepares for the new school year. In its third year at Evergreen, IQ Academy now enrolls nearly 600 students in grades six through 12, including 21 full-time, non-district students such as Anna, 15. She often studies in her east Minnehaha home alongside her mother, Rebecca, background.

Options grow to meet surging demand

By HOWARD RUCK
Columbian Staff writer

Wednesday kicks off Anna Babcock's sophomore year, her eighth go-round as an Evergreen district school student. But the energetic 15-year-old isn't catching up with good friends during hallway breaks. No rummaging a locker combination or reclaiming a prime classroom seat, either.

She'll just fire up her laptop and dig into class material for her four online courses this quarter near her mother, Rebecca, who is wrapping up an online master's degree from a top-tier Florida university.

Their east Minnehaha triplex lies outside the Evergreen district. In fact, Anna has never attended a conventional Evergreen school class. Just off the Washougal River in east Clark County, former Microsoft team manager Jason Spicer has already begun his fall semester. From his bedroom desk, the 48-year-old will complete the last two courses that stand between him and a bachelor's degree in business administration. It's a four-year degree, three decades in the making — interrupted by a lucrative 17 years at Microsoft's Renton home base.

Yet, Spicer doubts he'll attend the commencement ceremony in Pullman, 340 long miles away. He's never set foot on the Washington State University campus. Nothing personal, he adds, but he can't say that he ever will. But he'll sure be glad for his Cougar diploma.

Welcome to the bold world of online learning, in which a wave of 21st century students use the Internet to learn and to achieve their education goals, on their schedules and their terms.

A generation of tech-savvy adults and teens, a shortage of classroom seats and increased demand to accommodate varied individual learning styles has led public schools at all levels to embrace a mass movement, following the path blurred by private competitors such as City College.

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Online learning is not for everyone. Page A5
ONLINE LEARNING: What it is ... and isn’t

What’s important to know about online college courses:

IT’S NOT CHEAP: Students pay full tuition, or even more, than they would for traditional on-ground courses. Costs vary by institution; they can include mandatory fees, computer equipment, and other materials.

IT’S NOT EASY: Students must manage their time and stay organized to succeed. They often have to juggle work and other responsibilities while taking courses.

IT’S NOT FOR EVERYONE: Strong reading-writing skills are a must. Successful students are self-directed, disciplined, and must absorb content without hand-holding. Those who covet more personal, hands-on instruction will falter. Reliable Internet access is a must, with a backup plan should glitches arise. Of course, steady online use can tax those who are easily distracted.

IT’S NOT IMMEDIATE: Public institutions still offer class options, and private options may be more flexible. Health, virtual learning, and integration in courses. Students’ work ethic and personal qualities are key.

Online:

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The most important to know about online learning:

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Howard Buck

 Mixing it up

For Anna Babcock, there’s a fresh compromise. This week, the Minneha High School in the Clark County School District is offering asynchronous learning, where homework is due at the student’s convenience. The school has also implemented a “Flex Hour,” where students can work on specific assignments. Babcock said the changes have helped her students stay on track and motivated them to complete their work.

Teaching reset

It’s been a rough year for many teachers, but they’ve found ways to keep students engaged. Some have tried new technology-based strategies, like using virtual reality to take students on field trips or using online tools to deliver lessons. Others have focused on building relationships with students, using a more personalized approach to teaching. Despite the challenges, many teachers have found that these new methods have helped them better connect with their students and improve learning outcomes.