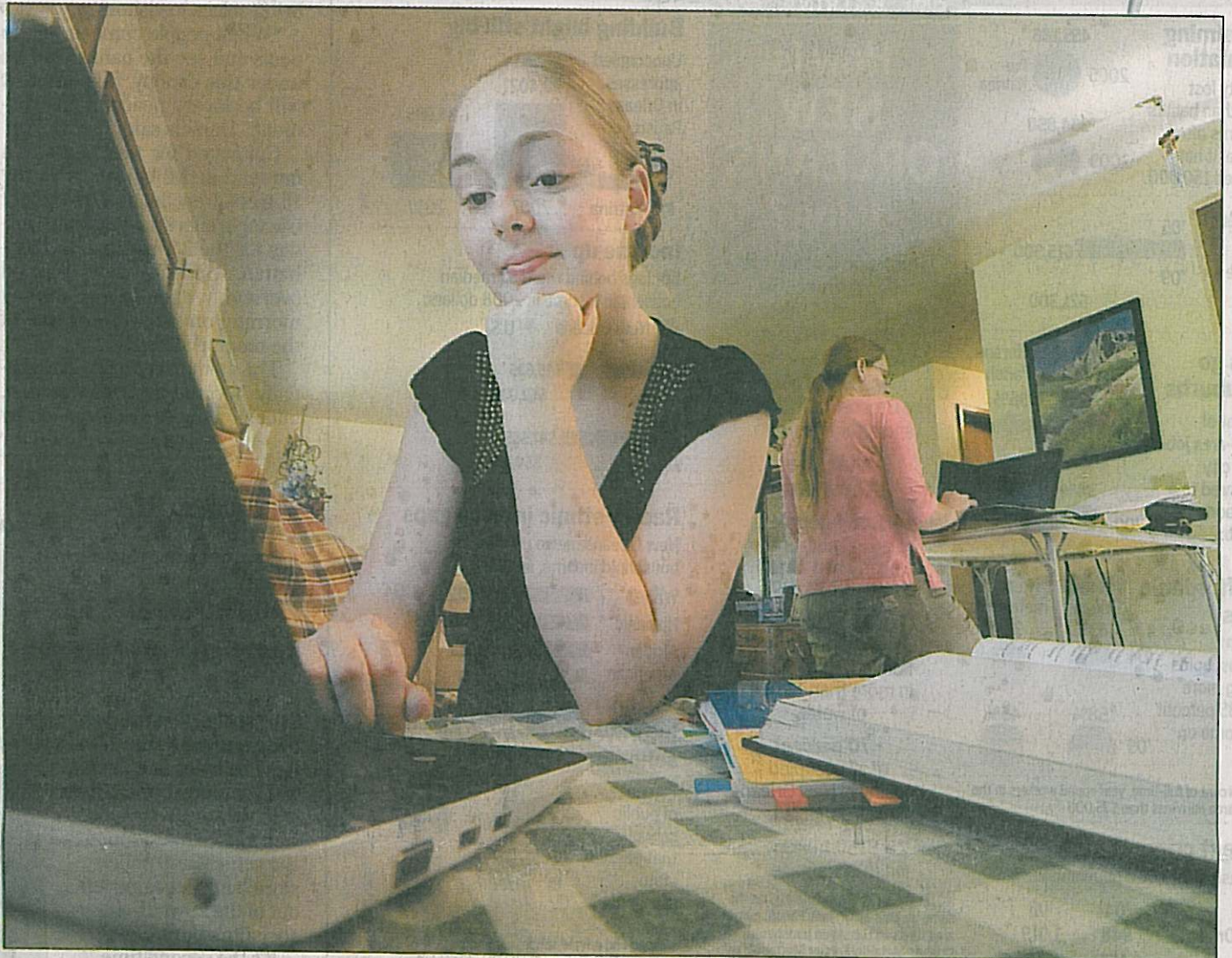


PUBLIC SCHOOLS CATCH ONLINE FEVER



MEG FRENDT/The Columbian

Anna Babcox, 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 211 full-time, out-of-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 BUCK**
Columbian staff writer

Wednesday kicks off Anna Babcox's sophomore year, her eighth go-round as an Evergreen district school student.

But the energetic 15-year-old won't be catching up with good friends during hallway breaks. No mastering a new 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 nook, 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 blazed by private competitors such as City Col-



Inside

■ Online learning is not for everyone. Page A5

ONLINE LEARNING: What it is ... and isn't

What's important to know about public school options:

IT'S NOT CHEAP. Students pay full tuition, or more, even though they don't take up classroom space. It costs colleges and universities up-front money to purchase curriculum and interactive online platforms, train instructors and pay them. Teachers put in as many, or

more hours, teaching online students as their classroom peers. In fact, Clark College charges a technology fee of \$15-\$30 for most online courses. (For grades K-12, public system students pay nothing.)

IT'S NOT QUICK. Don't mistake courses for an easy or time-saving shortcut. Expect to put in about three hours per credit-

hour for college courses each week; that's nine hours for a typical class. Writing e-mail inquiries to teachers, digesting reading material, joining mandatory group dialogue and team projects: All are time-consuming.

Ambitious students can work a few days ahead but must stick to highly organized class

schedules. There's no zipping through a 10-week course in half the time. Conversely, falling much behind can be near-disaster.

IT'S NOT FOR EVERYONE. Strong reading-writing skills are a must. Successful students are self-driven, 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 tempt those who are easily distracted.

IT IS LEGITIMATE. Public institutions have pressed rigor, healthy interaction and integrity in courses. Students' work

ethic and personalities are laid bare, more so than in the classroom, say teachers confident in their graduates' skills. Exams may be proctored and other safeguards limit plagiarism or cheating — no more likely than in traditional classrooms, instructors say.

— Howard Buck

Online:

From Page A1

lege, the University of Phoenix and others.

"Literally, there is a cultural shift. Our audience is going to demand we go there," said Rasoul Dastmozd, vice president of instruction at Clark College.

The Vancouver community college now has about 1,400 students enrolled in online-only courses, besides other hybrid classes taught mostly online with limited "face-to-face" instruction, as it's now labeled. Total credits amount to about 1,100 full-time students and comprise 10 percent of all Clark credits earned.

In just a handful of years, produced in part by a Great Recession enrollment stampede, Clark has easily met its initial online targets. A majority of online students are female; many have children and are home-bound. Online students of either sex often must juggle jobs or family obligations, and most are a bit older than Clark's average.

This summer, WSU announced that students may now earn one of eight common bachelor's degrees — from accounting, to history to sociology — completely online.

Dastmozd predicts a vast surge in teens learning online, meaning incoming freshmen: "They're digital natives. They're born, literally, with a BlackBerry in their hand. Why not make the material available to them?"

'New frontier'

Babcox offers just such a case.

Raised as a Seventh-day Adventist, she found her brief private-school experience lacking. By the second grade, she entered Evergreen Public Schools' Home Choice Academy, which offers classroom instruction to children who are mostly home-schooled. She immediately thrived.

By eighth grade, seeking flexibility to allow for church missionary trips, she tried a few online courses through the iQ Academy curriculum Evergreen now offers to students locally and statewide. She was hooked, just like that.

"I could be in control," Babcox said. She prefers to pound on one subject per day. This fall, she'll tackle 10th-grade English on Monday; geometry on Tuesday; biology on Wednesday; and nutrition and wellness on Thursday.

"It helps me focus, that way. It's great, because you're able to individualize it so much. You're not stuck in a class with a goof-off, whatever his name is," she said.

Babcox finds iQ Academy's quality impressive. "I was so drawn to online, because you're



Jason Spicer, 48, a Washington State University online student, plays with his dog, Zaika, near his home computer in Washougal. He plans to use his savings to purchase and operate a small business.

MEG FRENDT/The Columbian

getting much higher material," she said. "It's like a new frontier in education."

Last year, the normally A-student concedes, "I learned my lesson and got my butt kicked" when she fell behind schedule. "I've got it down this year. There's no room for procrastination, at all."

Anne Sturdevant directs Evergreen's Home Choice school and its iQ Academy. Online students emerge from three groups, she's found: Those who work a job or may have a child to care for; those from a home-school background; and those who aren't keen on a comprehensive high school and figure they learn best online.

"They need to stay with the weekly course," Sturdevant said. "But they don't have to do that between the hours of 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. They get to choose when and where and what hours they need to work."

Proven value

The freedom and learning style perfectly fit Spicer, the WSU student said.

The Fort Vancouver High School grad enjoyed some traditional college at Western Washington University before he landed work at Microsoft, he said. But when he sought to polish his credentials, and nab that bachelor's degree, conventional college courses were a logistical nightmare, especially in Seattle-area traffic.

He was wary of private online degrees, but then discovered WSU's program.

"The real question was, does anybody value online degrees?" Spicer said. He figured WSU was respected and had a legitimate online presence.

He has found WSU courses to be well-organized, his work efficient, his professor and student contact sufficient.

"I really do learn best out of the textbook. I've never needed a whole lot of interaction, with students or professors," Spicer said. If needed, his instructors can promptly answer questions. And, today's courses demand more team projects, online "journaling" and group discussions that calm any fears that "people on computers will sit in their little silos and not get together," he said.

Much care went into building WSU's online repertoire, said Muriel Oaks, dean of online learning. She has led Pullman's

growth in "distance learning" since 1992, "when no one knew what it was," she said.

WSU online classes demand "a very robust interaction," Oaks said. "It's the same courses, and the same faculty that's teaching them." Admissions requirements and expectations are no different, either.

Outreach by WSU and Clark College has been life-changing for home-bound students, including many young mothers.

"It's a great alternative. I can't imagine paying tuition and child care and trying to go to school," said Emily Waters, 23. She's a Stevenson resident and mother of 9-month-old son, and just completed a human development

bachelor's degree.

Online WSU courses allowed her to return to her native Stevenson, with her husband, Tom; help her care for an ailing parent; and work part time for Skamania County as she juggled studies with her pregnancy and then parenting Cyril, she said.

It went so well, Waters suggested WSU's program to a sister-in-law living in North Carolina, married to a Marine.

"As long as you have Internet access, you can do schooling anywhere in the world," she said.

Felida resident Ligia Braun is a legal Mexican immigrant and stay-home mother for her 7-year-old son, Derek. When she and her husband, Kevin, explored online options, Clark proved most affordable and seemed worth a try.

"After my first class, I thought, 'This is going to work for me,'" said Braun, 38, in her second year of study for a psychology transfer degree. "At my age, I'm not looking to go to school and socialize and that stuff. I save on gas, I don't have to get dressed — it's cheaper."

Braun worried the all-English instruction might trip her up, but her language skills have blossomed.

"A lot of immigrants whose first language is not English, they think online courses are really challenging," Braun said. "They're really not that bad. The teachers are incredibly helpful."

Teaching reset

It's been doubly a joy for Ann Virtu Snyder, women's studies instructor at Clark College, to see women such as Braun and Waters succeed online.

"I love it. It gives students an opportunity who otherwise could not take a class," said Sny-

der. She has taught since 1994, including the past eight years at Clark. She's had several new mothers "just astound me," she said: "I have a student who has a baby Tuesday and will be on the discussion board Thursday."

Snyder dug into online work four years ago and briefly served as Clark's interim dean for online learning. She's now fully online. She said she's never been a better teacher, even if she does miss the "performance art" aspect of the classroom.

"Because it's almost exclusively in writing, it made me think more about how I was constructing complex subjects and how I was communicating them," she said. She now can digest student questions and really think before e-mailing, she said.

Mixing it up

For Anna Babcox, there's a fresh compromise. This week, the Minnehaha teen also begins a criminal justice class at the Clark County Skills Center, next step on her dream to become a police officer. Nine years of karate instruction also have strengthened her hand.

Otherwise, Anna continues to study alongside her mother, Rebecca, finishing her aeronautical engineering master's degree from Emory-Riddle Aeronautical University. That's plenty of company, unless she wants to visit with one of her iQ Academy classmates from, say, Seattle or Spokane.

"It's hard to get together, but we'll use Skype," Anna said, naming a popular online video link. "Those are the days you get out of the PJs."

HOWARD BUCK: 360-735-4515 or howard.buck@columbian.com.