

## Online learning boom echoes across state

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Midmorning at Federal Way's Internet Academy, the hum of the air conditioner fills the school's one classroom. Just four students tap at keyboards while one teacher talks on the phone.

The quiet, however, is an illusion. This storefront school, wedged among mortgage, insurance and health-care firms in a suburban strip mall, is at the center of a boom in online education.

Behind the academy's front counter, a Washington state map illustrates the speed and range of the academy's growth, which parallels state and national trends. Nine years ago, the program opened with an enrollment of 30, all residents of the Federal Way School District. Today, thousands of pins mark towns across the state where its students live, from Forks to Chewelah, from Trout Lake to Brewster. Last school year, about 1,500 students took one or more classes.

Statewide, 10,161 Washington students -- mostly in high school -- took one or more online classes for credit last school year, more than triple the number four years ago, according to a survey done by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. One of the first virtual public schools -- the Florida Virtual School -- served about 21,000 students.

Internet classes, a trickle in public schools a decade ago, are rapidly joining the education mainstream -- so quickly that it's unclear what all the ramifications may be.

Critics worry about the social interaction students miss when they sit in front of a screen to learn -- not just socializing, but the give-and-take of classroom debate and discussion. And not all online classes offer good instruction.

"There's a lot of junk out there," said Sally Lancaster, head of alternative programs in the Everett School District, including its online high school.

A 2004 report by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory warned that there is little research into how well students learn online, although some dispute that.

"Online is just another form of distance education," says Seymour Hanfling of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, a nonprofit group in Portland. "A lot of work over the last 30 years shows that well-constructed distance learning is effective."

But there's no question about the popularity of online learning.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised to see it double or triple in the next three to five years," said Dennis Small, educational-technology program manager at the state superintendent's office.

A natural fit for some

Anna Pagac, who graduated from Forks High School in June, took her first online class as a freshman simply because all the electives she wanted at her school were full. She liked it so much she took five more.

Five years ago, online proponents thought that cyber classes would appeal most to motivated students like Pagac, who enjoys the independence of online learning and jumped at the chance to take rigorous electives such as multicultural literature and a symposium on bioethics -- the kind of courses that small schools such as Forks usually can't offer.

"I don't know if we have any English electives at our school," she said.

Homeschool students also are a natural fit, as well as the few who want to fit school around a passion for sports or acting. (The Internet Academy's most-famous former student is Apolo Ohno, the Olympic speed-skating champion.) But the fastest growing segment of online learners are those who need to retake courses they've missed or failed.

They include three of the students who worked at Federal Way's Internet Academy one morning late last month. Shirley Voigt, 15, worked on Algebra II problems as she waited to talk with her teacher, Mike Buchanan, who was helping another student over the phone. Hannah Kim, 17, and Anastasia Williams, 17, sat side by side as they did an exercise on perception for a psychology class.

For Kim and Williams, the choice to take the course online was purely practical. They could take only two courses in Federal Way's regular summer school but needed a third to graduate on time next June from Decatur High School.

Voigt says she finds it easier to pay attention to the computer than to a teacher in class. And she hoped to be able to finish Algebra II faster online than in regular summer school.

The way online classes work varies. At the Internet Academy, they are asynchronous, meaning that students don't have to sit together at the computer at the same time.

Teachers often e-mail assignments, which can include reading, math problems or working through material presented online. Discussions are conducted in online forums, with students contributing written comments. Students e-mail homework to their teacher or, at times, mail it.

The teachers and students may never see each other face to face, and often don't know one another's ethnicity or even gender. But they report that they get to know each other well through written communication.

Students usually must complete a certain amount of work each week, and if they don't, the teacher calls their parents. In some classes, however, they can work as fast as they like. One of Buchanan's students finished a semester-long Algebra II class in 10 days.

Almost every subject offered in high school these days can be found online, too, including science classes, for which teachers adapt labs so that students can do them at home. (Buchanan says some of his students document their labs with photographs.) Foreign languages are popular, too, often with the use of tapes.

The Everett School District even offers a P.E. class via computer. Students develop their fitness plans and document their exercise, which must be signed by a parent or coach. It's been a popular class for students who struggle with body image, Lancaster said, or those who just want to free up time to take another elective during the school day.

### Working together

The Internet Academy is the largest online public school in Washington state, open to students at all grade levels. The Evergreen School District in Southwest Washington runs a similar but smaller online school, the Evergreen Internet Academy.

Some districts also offer online classes just to their own students, including Everett, which had 300 students take online classes this summer, up from 100 last year.

Sometimes, districts create courses themselves, as Federal Way's Internet Academy does. They also buy or license online classes from commercial providers. The Steilacoom School District, for example, this fall will use curriculum from K-12, Inc., a company started by former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, for a new, full-time online program for its elementary- and middle-school students.

It's up to a student's school district whether to accept credit from online courses -- and some don't let students take online classes that duplicate what's offered at their schools.

Pricing varies. Students who sign up for Internet Academy, for example, pay nothing if they take the class as part of a regular schedule. Their district, however, arranges to pay the Internet Academy about \$395 a class, roughly the amount of state support the district receives per student per class. If a student already takes a full load at school, however, they must pay the fee. And summer school costs \$180 per class for everyone.

Pagac took her classes from the Virtual High School, a national co-op whose classes are available through the Digital Learning Commons, a Washington state clearinghouse for online courses and other resources. The Commons has a catalog of more than 300 classes (from seven providers) that were free to schools last year as part of its two-year pilot phase. This fall, school districts must pay \$6 per student to receive \$2,000-\$6,000 worth of online classes, and access to research and professional-development resources online.

High-school students sometimes pay fees for online classes if they receive college credit, but generally districts pick up the cost, said Small, of the state superintendent's office.

Not for everyone

Online classes aren't for everyone. Many students do not have the motivation and discipline to work as independently as online classes require.

"If you're a student who doesn't like to write, or doesn't like to use a computer, it's probably not the environment for you," said Hanfling, of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

At the Internet Academy, for example, about a quarter of the students who start a course never complete it, said Principal Ron Mayberry.

The Digital Learning Commons tries to keep students on track by requiring member schools to appoint a staff member charged with keeping tabs on student progress. The Florida Virtual School now only gets funding for those students who successfully complete a course.

Students can't take all their courses online: Schools such as the Internet Academy don't grant diplomas. The thrust of the online boom, so far, supplements rather than replaces face-to-face learning.

But it keeps growing, sometimes faster than states can keep up.

Earlier this year, for example, the Internet Academy faced loss of funding because teachers didn't have weekly face-to-face contact with students, something that Washington state law required. But the state Legislature passed a law allowing e-mail to be considered contact, too.

The threat averted, the Academy is forging ahead this fall into yet new online territory. In a partnership with the University of Washington, it will offer two classes in which students can receive high-school and college credit simultaneously: English and geology.

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