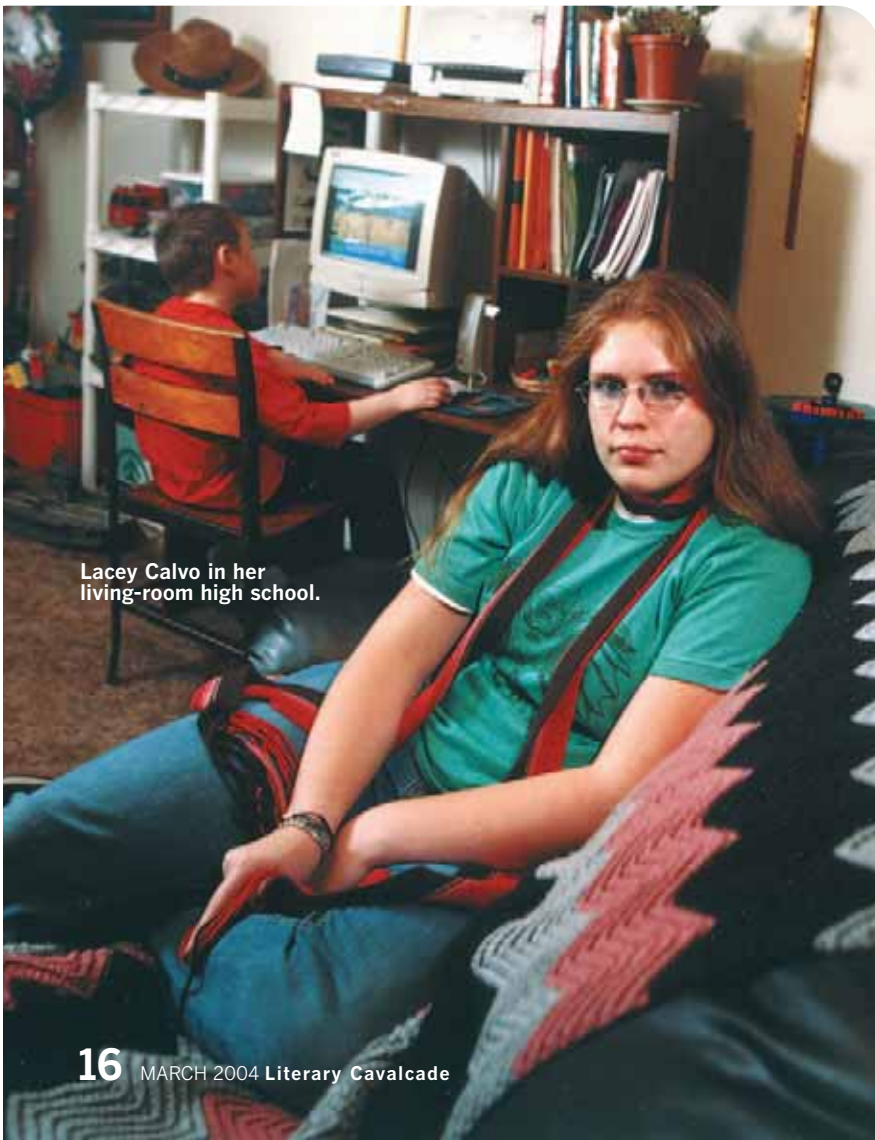


Virtual High School

Does ^{It} Make

the ^{Grade?}

by Emily White



Lacey Calvo in her living-room high school.

For a growing number of teens, attending high school in cyberspace has kept them from dropping out. But can a computer really deliver the high-school experience?

ANDY MARKISHTUM, A SELF-DESCRIBED SLACKER, used to have a backpack full of half-finished assignments. “I’d get too distracted,” he says. “There would be kids sitting right next to me talking or something, and instead of paying attention to the teacher, I would drift off.”

His mom decided he needed to leave behind his old scene. So Andy enrolled in Salem-Keizer Online high school, and he says, “Now I can really concentrate.”

Salem-Keizer Online, or SKO, is one in a growing number of virtual schools. SKO has 131 students enrolled in the Salem, Oregon, area. Nationwide, there were about 50,000 students in virtual courses last year.

Andy says that without virtual school, he “probably would have dropped out.” Now he will graduate almost on time.

Virtual school seems like an ideal choice for kids who don’t fit in or can’t cope. Kyle Drew, 16, a junior at SKO, says: “I couldn’t get

it together. I was skipping more and more classes, until I was afraid to go to school.”

On SKO’s Web site, students can enter a classroom without being noticed by their classmates by clicking the “make yourself invisible” icon—a good description of what these kids are actually doing. Before the internet, they would have had little choice but to muddle through. Now, they have disappeared from the school building altogether, a new breed of outsider, loners for the wired age.

Douglas Koch is only 12, but he is already a high school sophomore. He says that he hopes to graduate by the time he’s 15. Douglas’s 10-year-old brother, Gregory, is stationed across the room from him—he is also a grade-jumper. The Koch brothers have been students at the private Christa McAuliffe Academy, an online school reaching kids from all over the country.

Douglas looks at his monitor, searching for evidence of his Spanish teacher. He puts on a headset and greets her through the attached microphone. Her live voice comes through the computer speakers, tinny and distant.

Across the room, Gregory answers multiple-choice math questions about inverse numbers. Gregory isn’t in contact with a human teacher right now; he will turn in a test later and wait for an e-mail message telling him how he did.

At lunchtime, they get up from their computers and go to the kitchen together. Their mother, Katie Craven, says that at first she wondered if keeping the kids home was the right thing. “It was only supposed to be temporary,” she says, “but the kids really liked it.”

Sometimes, before class, they chitchat with other online kids about the weather: “It is snowing here.” “It is 104 degrees here.” Then the class begins, and the chitchat stops. No notes are passed, no spit wads thrown, no eye contact made.

Are They Missing Out?

Do virtual-school kids miss the volatile human combustion of the classroom? Douglas and Gregory seem happy to be able to stay at home and never put their shoes on. Andy admits to missing it sometimes. “Every once in a while I think it would be cool to go back to high school because

there are tons of people there,” he says. “But at the same time, there are too many problems for me.”

Andy lost contact with most of his friends when he left his *real* high school. He doesn’t know where they are anymore. While virtual school doesn’t require that you leave your peers behind, it makes it harder to feel as if you’re part of a crowd.

There’s No Such Thing As Virtual Detention

SKO’s administrators say that since the kids are absent from regular classrooms, they can’t act up in school. “There tend to be fewer behavior problems,” says the program coordinator, Jim Saffeels. “Only when a kid has not been heard from over e-mail for a week or so do the adults start to worry, sending out messages: Are you there? Are you working?”

I’m talking to Saffeels in the SKO offices. It’s the first day of school, and there’s a glitch: Many SKO students never received their passwords. They can’t get through the virtual-school doors. (The computer problems are numerous.)

Burt Kanner, a math teacher, appears in the doorway. Kanner seems skeptical about all this virtual-school hype. For most of his 45 years as a teacher, Kanner has dealt with kids face-to-face. “It doesn’t really feel like teaching. Now I am mainly a troubleshooter.”

Lacey Calvo, 16, was assigned Kanner for online algebra last year. She describes him as “really helpful.” Lacey enrolled at SKO a year and a half ago. Lacey says, “I didn’t care about anything or anybody. I did whatever I wanted to do. Now I help my mom pay the bills and take my brother to school.”

Lacey doesn’t have to go shopping for back-to-school clothes or worry that some random girl is going to hate her outfit. She goes to school at a desk in the living room, surrounded by video games, unwashed dishes, her brother’s toy-car collections. For PE credit, Lacey takes long walks around the neighborhood.

Lacey has rejected the life she led at South Salem High School, but there are traces of restlessness. Like Andy, Lacey does not quite trust the

continued →

Fact or Opinion?

Discerning fact from opinion is important when it comes to forming your own opinion. Practice by labeling the following statements “F” for fact, or “O” for opinion.

>> While virtual school doesn’t require that you leave your peers behind, it makes it harder to feel as if you’re part of a crowd. ____

>> Now, they have disappeared from the school building altogether, a new breed of outsider, loners for the wired age. ____

>> Lacey doesn’t have to go shopping for back-to-school clothes or worry that some random girl is going to hate her outfit. ____

>> Virtual school seems like an ideal choice for kids who don’t fit in or can’t cope. ____



20-Minute Essay
>>TAKE 20 MINUTES
TO PLAN AND WRITE AN ESSAY BASED ON THE FOLLOWING:
 “Yet it is also true that there is a beauty in high school: those long, exhausting hours full of other kids, everyone trying to interpret one another.” What does the author mean by this statement? Do you agree or disagree? Use examples from your own experience to back up your opinion.

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self that emerged in the halls of high school, and she says that if she had stayed, she would have entangled herself in a bad fate.

When talking to virtual-school kids, there is a common thread: the sense that they have escaped a bad situation by getting out of high school.

An Off-Line Social Life

Efforts are made to socialize virtual-school kids: dances, game nights, and bowling nights are held. At Odyssey Charter School in Las Vegas, the students occasionally get together for trips to the Nevada History Museum. At Electronic Charter School in Kansas, there are nights at a “fun center.” Jennifer Vandiver is the prom coordinator at Christa McAuliffe Academy. In a dreamy voice, she describes a prom that takes place in a “room full of mirrors” with a cardboard Eiffel Tower. Kids fly in from far-flung locations; there’s a get-acquainted picnic the day before. Faces are put to screen names.



Because the phenomenon of full-time online education is relatively new, there is little research into its lasting effects—whether its practitioners become introverts and computer zombies or whether, as one mother puts it, the kids “have gathered their energy so they can go out into the world and be more effective.”

Before Columbine, the social Darwinism of the hallway was seen as character building. Promoters of virtual school claim traditional school is a haven for bullies, a brutal, corrupt-



Andy Markishtum used to be a slacker.

ed environment in which violent confrontations are bound to occur.

Yet it is also true that there is a beauty in high school: those long, exhausting hours full of other kids, everyone trying to interpret one another.

For Lacey, virtual school has meant a taming and organizing of her restlessness. “I have grown up, and I have a grip on reality,” she says. Now she can help her overworked single mom around the house. “My mom knows I am here for her and always will be,” she says. When the buzzer rings on the washer, she can get up from her earth-science class to shift the load over to the dryer. She can take breaks in the garage and watch her neighbor’s new lawn being delivered. She doesn’t have to sit in a classroom, wondering if she can trust herself or the kids around her, wondering what she forgot at home. ■

>>Your Turn! What’s your opinion? If a friend who has been having difficulty in school is contemplating attending virtual high school, would you support this idea or try to discourage it? Write a letter persuading your friend toward your point of view.