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Virtual education growing up

5 online schools already operating in Wisconsin

By Kathy Walsh Nufer

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APPLETON — As a teacher in Wisconsin's only virtual elementary school, Lynne Rhodes is aware of a lawsuit threatening its future.

But midway through the school's initial year, she doesn't have time to worry about charges that Wisconsin Connections Academy violates state open enrollment and charter school laws. Nor can she wait for legislators to figure out how online learning fits into those laws.

"I'm too busy trying to teach my 44 students (statewide)," Rhodes said.

Virtual education — where just about anyone can attend classes online — is an emerging option in Wisconsin, as districts look for flexible programs sought by parents. At the same time, courts and lawmakers are trying to figure out its boundaries.

Four virtual high schools and one online K-8 school are operating in the state. A second online elementary school was approved this week in Fredonia, and other school districts are considering similar plans.

"I think that people are finally looking at it seriously as a credible and viable option," said Connie Radtke, program leader for Appleton's new eSchool, one of the virtual high schools.

"Six months ago when we spoke at conferences we encountered hostile questions," she said. "When we spoke at the Wisconsin Association of School Boards convention (two weeks ago), it was clear districts are way beyond the hostility and think it's something they need to embrace."

Radtke said 60 Appleton students are taking one or more eSchool classes and 20 are signed up for summer.

From a freshman who failed algebra and doesn't want to wait until summer school to try again, to a senior who

wanted to take psychology and physics the same class hour and thought she had to give one up, Radtke said, "We can't keep up with all the ways students can use it."

Elizabeth Sauter, a freshman at Appleton East High School, takes her required health course online so she can take band and choir this semester.

"The great thing is I can go to the Web 24 hours a day and do the class at my own convenience and pace," she said.

Real concerns

This new brand of education also has caused concerns.

The state's largest teachers union, WEAC (Wisconsin Education Association Council), has legally challenged Wisconsin Connections Academy, the online elementary school in the Appleton Area School District.

The school worries WEAC mainly because it enrolls children from outside the district, said Lucy Brown, a lawyer for the union. The virtual school students' home districts pay Appleton \$5,195 of the \$7,000 they receive in state aid for each student.

Such a school, Brown said, runs afoul of the state's open enrollment policy, which allows students to attend school in another district. A court is scheduled to decide in April.

Brown also questions having virtual schools that essentially do not serve their own district's population. "I'm not sure there's any accountability."

She said state lawmakers will need to decide the larger issues of virtual education.

"They need to consider how they want virtual schools to work, how they should be funded and who should be starting these schools," she said.

Linda Dawson, Appleton's assistant superintendent, said the school system is talking about regionalizing the management of WCA with Cooperative Educational Service Agency 6, a consortium of districts. However, the district is waiting to see what happens at the state level.

"It's certainly nothing we're backing away from," she said, "but I think clarification of how the open enrollment and charter laws fit together with virtual schools is an issue."

Online options

Wisconsin's virtual high schools avoid criticism about open enrollment by contracting with districts.

Mary Lou Rey, who coordinates Wisconsin Virtual High School based at CESA 9 in Tomahawk, said students who

take online courses remain in their local districts and work for a diploma through their home high school. "They pay us a tuition fee of \$325 per semester course."

Appleton's eSchool adopted the same plan.

"We'd much rather have that than open enrollment," Radtke said. "The students take other courses in their district and a couple online with us to supplement."

Virtual school advocates say Wisconsin lags behind in offering this option. Online schools are in 35 other states, and 26 run statewide programs.

Predictions are that in this century 50 percent of learning will take place online, either in a classroom or totally virtual, Ley said. "It's the direction business and industry are going in, and many colleges require an online course."

The Appleton, Kiel and CESA 9 virtual high schools are taking the lead on a state grant to establish a statewide network to increase access to online learning, set standards and policies for online courses, and promote teacher training and sharing resources.

Many districts may go with existing virtual programs rather than start their own.

"It's a very cost-laden venture - writing courses, putting in instruction design features, hosting it, hiring teachers, evaluating and managing it all," Ley said.

Radtke said interest is strong from financially strapped districts and technical colleges looking for cost-effective ways to use limited resources.

"I think there is a tremendous future for collaboration," she said. "Instead of duplicating low-enrollment courses, we could extend those resources."

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