

Executive Director Bush weighs in on Legislature compromise

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This week, the Wisconsin Legislature reverted to one of the practices that has made Wisconsin a leader in education: Leaders in both houses reached across partisan lines and announced a compromise that allows Wisconsin's internet-based virtual schools to continue to educate students in this state.

It was a day to be proud of our lawmakers – and for teachers around the state who know that virtual schooling must be part of our educational future.

Until the compromise was reached on Thursday, it wasn't clear whether Wisconsin could continue to be a leader in new, internet-based ways to teach some children. An appeals court, rejecting a lower court ruling that suddenly made on-line schools potentially illegal.

This compromise corrects the problems the court identified – and we can now proudly move forward.

The fact is that traditional schools are great for most students. But virtual schools have a strong role to play for children who, for various reasons, can't physically attend regularly, who struggle in the traditional class room, or who, frankly learn best and many times fastest working at their own pace.

At Insight Schools of Wisconsin, the state's newest virtual charter high school, each student selects from 120 classes. Each has a state certified teacher – and each student has an iMentor to help guide them through their studies and their lives. We know our model helps teenagers succeed. We've seen it hundreds of times already.

But don't ask us. The compromise this week stemmed in part from a hearing last week in which the halls of the Capitol were literally packed with families of students of virtual schools. Parents passionately described how important protecting this educational option was to them and their children. A number of students testified exactly how and why these schools have turned their lives around. They pleaded with lawmakers to come together to keep their school open.

This week, democracy worked.

Lawmakers, Rep. Brett Davis, R-Monroe, Sen. John Lehman, D-Racine, and Sen. Luther Olsen, R-Berlin (himself a former school board member) worked with their leaders, crafted the compromise that continues funding to these schools and allows them to attract enough students to keep these options solvent.

To be honest, we were surprised it came to this. Courts had already ruled in favor of these schools twice. And when it comes to electronic-based teaching and learning, the future is already

here. Individual school districts, the state of Wisconsin, DPI and the CESA districts are already heavily wired and already rely on distance learning in thousands of different areas and applications.

It doesn't take an educational expert to see that technology and communication have leveled the playing field around the world and keeping our students competitive with 21st century learning skills is critical.

We appreciate that communities have made tremendous investments in the brick, mortar and equipment that make up their schools. We're not a threat to that investment. We're a complement. We're bringing back students to public education who, for the most part, were failing or who had dropped out of traditional public schools.

We teach only a tiny percentage of students. But we offer a great range of classes, we allow students to learn at their own pace, with one-on-one instruction in a safe, non-threatening environment. We are highly accountable. And we're successful at delivering a high quality education to our students.

We're now urging both houses of the Legislature to quickly pass this compromise agreement – and we're appealing to Gov. Jim Doyle to sign it.

At the very least, school districts and on-line schools like mine, which have invested heavily in this future learning opportunity, need clarity in the law.

More importantly, the state's economy, its role as a national leader in education and the academic careers of several thousand Wisconsin school children are depending upon it.

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