

# Virtual schools serve vital niche

## *Bipartisan effort shows lawmakers agree*

Eau Claire, WI - January 28, 2008 -

The Wisconsin Legislature last week 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 the teachers around the state who know that virtual schooling must be part of our educational future.

Until the compromise was reached, it wasn't clear whether Wisconsin could continue to be a leader in new, Internet-based ways to teach some children. An appeals court ruling suddenly made online schools potentially illegal, but last week's legislative compromise corrects the problems the court identified, and we can now move forward.

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 classroom, or who, frankly, learn best and many times fastest working at their own pace.

At Insight School of Wisconsin, the state's newest virtual charter high school, each student selects from 120 classes. Each has a state certified teacher as well as 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 last week stemmed in part from a hearing two weeks ago in which families of students of virtual schools packed the Capitol. Parents passionately described the importance of this educational option for 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.

Last week, democracy worked.

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

When it comes to electronic-based teaching and learning, the future is already here. Individual school districts, the state of Wisconsin, the Department of Public Instruction and the Cooperative

Educational Service Agency districts already rely on distance learning in thousands of areas and applications.

It doesn't take an educational expert to see 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, nonthreatening environment. We are highly accountable. And we're successful at delivering a quality education to our students.

We urge 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 online schools like mine, which have invested heavily in this future learning opportunity, need clarity in the law.

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

*Bush is executive director of Insight School of Wisconsin based in Grantsburg, an online high school with more than 200 students statewide.*

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