

Virtual schools here to stay; law, courts must adapt

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Insight School of Wisconsin, one of the state's newest publicly chartered virtual schools, could not disagree more profoundly with the recent Court of Appeals ruling that a virtual school violated Wisconsin law because its teachers and students are not entirely located within one school district's borders.

The ruling is a step back for education. It hurts Wisconsin's quest to be economically competitive in a high-tech, online educational world. Most disturbingly, it hurts some of the neediest students we're all trying so hard to help.

The Appeals Court ruling denies what is already happening in schools. As a former teacher and principal, let me point out the obvious: Technology has changed the classroom. Online schools, video programming and Web-based distance learning have obliterated school district borders. The world is now our classroom.

Visit a school today and you'll likely see that it's already linked to one of the state's 33 distance learning networks. You might see a distance-taught class over BadgerNet taught by teachers in another city, state or country.

To find that this educational practice is illegal or should be denied state funding because the teachers and students are based outside of the district would pose a bit of a double standard, especially considering the state itself operates BadgerNet.

The court also seemed to gloss over Wisconsin's "school choice" law, which allows students to attend public schools outside of their district. That's what "choice" means—and it's hard to imagine the Legislature meant something else when it created the state open enrollment system.

Insight School of Wisconsin is one of the state's most advanced virtual high schools. We're chartered as a public school in northwest Wisconsin, and any student in the state can choose to attend. Our 134 courses are expertly designed and taught by state-certified teachers, like others in Wisconsin. Our courses are rigorous, requiring up to five or six hours of schoolwork a day (on a computer we provide).

Virtual school isn't for all children. And we fully appreciate that communities have made tremendous investments in the brick, mortar and equipment that make up their schools. We and our colleagues in the virtual school community are 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.

In those cases, online schools are a better fit. Children have always learned at different rates and in different ways. Virtual education is one way to reach these children -- and it is a microcosm of where technology is taking our society.

We offer a great range of classes. We allow students to learn at their own pace under certified teachers. Teachers work with students individually, providing 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 also firmly believe that our public charter virtual school should be a "choice" as the Legislature defines it— and as all other courts in Wisconsin have ruled.

We're urging the Supreme Court to review the Appeals Court decision and assess it both on the letter and spirit of the law. Wisconsin needs a thoughtful definitive ruling on this critical issue. The economy and the academic careers of several thousand Wisconsin schoolchildren are depending upon it.

Jeff Bush is executive director of Insight School of Wisconsin.

Jeff Bush, guest columnist
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