

# Students need options; Keep virtual schools open

*Grantsburg, WI - January 16, 2008 -*

Several years ago the Grantsburg School District launched a state-wide, on-line charter high school using licensed and highly qualified teachers, established best practices of distance learning, and a rigorous curriculum to educate high school students. This charter school was funded by a grant through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Today, Insight School of Wisconsin Charter School serves approximately 240 students and is projected to grow to 1,000 pupils by fall of 2008. It is a highly accountable public high school. The faculty is professionally trained in delivering online instruction. Our Wisconsin-licensed teachers are committed educators who are passionate about delivering individualized, one-to-one instruction to their students. The school uses powerful technology including engaging web-based courses and electronic "virtual" classrooms. We also build a strong school community through numerous clubs, events, and face-to-face activities. Each student has an I-mentor that helps guide them through their courses. We serve kids with learning challenges, medical conditions, and special needs; high performing students; students that need to move at their own pace; and students who require a more flexible schedule and personalized learning experience. Many of these students were previously homeschooled.

All of this and more has made Grantsburg Virtual School and Insight School of Wisconsin an excellent public school option for many students. On December 5, 2007 the state Appeals Court issued a ruling against the Northern Ozaukee School District Virtual School. The court ruling is so sweeping it is threatening every online school in Wisconsin. They have filed an appeal with the Wisconsin Supreme Court. We are hopeful that the Wisconsin Supreme Court will take the case and rule in favor of online schools, as two previous courts did.

The uncertainty created by this latest court ruling is extremely unsettling for every online school student and teacher in Wisconsin. Approximately 1,500 online students plan to rally at the Capital in Madison on Wednesday to show their support at a public hearing on proposed legislation. Legislation recently introduced in the Assembly by Representatives Brett Davis and Daniel LeMahieu is very encouraging. Their bill clarifies state statutes to make certain that all online schools can serve kids for years to come.

It protects parents' ability to choose the best public school option for their children. It promotes innovation, accountability and education excellence. It saves our on-line schools. Unfortunately, legislation proposed in the Senate by Senator John Lehman does the exact opposite — it would force online charter schools to close. Senator Lehman proposes a massive 50 percent cut in funding to online public charter schools. Such an enormous cut would make it impossible for districts to operate online schools. Thousands of kids would lose their schools and teachers would lose their jobs. Wisconsin's online schools already receive nearly half of the total funding provided to traditional public schools, and less funding than what many other states provide to

full-time online schools. The Lehman bill also establishes arbitrary new mandates on teacher that are not based on any research or best practices used in online learning, and it creates new enrollment provisions that restrict access for children and stifle the ability for parents to choose an online school for their children. The Grantsburg School District is proud to offer a quality online high school. Most importantly, students are engaged in learning. This is why we hope that policymakers will work together to make sure all of our state's online schools, are protected and preserved.

Dr. Joni Burgin is the Superintendent of the Grantsburg School District. Billy Beesley is the Principal and Jeff Bush is the Executive Director of Insight School of Wisconsin.

Burgin, Insight School of Wisconsin leaders Jeff Bush and Billy Beesley, and high school teacher Josh Watt are among the Grantsburg contingent who are in Madison today (Jan. 16).

"We're going to plead our case," Burgin said Tuesday.

Burgin said the Assembly's committee on education bill, called the Davis Bill, is a minimalist bill. "It just fixes the statutes to allow successful virtual schools to continue," she said.

The Senate committee's bill, on the other hand, does much more.

"If this one goes, we're toast," a clearly agitated Burgin said at Monday's school board meeting, referring to Senator John Lehman's bill to "fix" the problem.

Burgin characterizes the Lehman BUI as a bill "for people who don't like virtual school."

"It's a way to shut them down," Burgin said.

She's not alone in her view.

"If this bill were to pass, thousands of families across this state would be dealt a devastating blow," Rose Fernandez stated. Fernandez is the president of the Wisconsin Coalition of Virtual School Families.

In addition to the hearings, Burgin said there is also a massive rally planned for Madison so students and parents can express their support for virtual schools.

In fact, Beesley and several Insight School of Wisconsin students have requested some time with Governor Jim Doyle to make an argument for on-line schools while they are in the capital.

According to Burgin, State Senator Sheila Harsdorf has met with Insight School of Wisconsin personnel and is on board to support the Davis Bill. She said they are hoping to contact Representative Ann Hraychuck and get her support as well.

"We're just getting started," Burgin said of the charter school. "We don't want to be closed down before we have a chance to help kids."

Until the legislature votes on Jan. 29, it's business as usual. The Insight School is gearing up for the three-week open enrollment period in February when they are going after 3,000 applications state-wide.

"We're hoping to get 1,000 students enrolled here by fall," Burgin said.

By JONI BURGIN and WILLIAM HARBRON

Burnett County Sentinel – Page 4a  
January 16, 2008  
Grantsburg, WI