

Innovation more important than ever in schools

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The Wisconsin Legislature last week resumed debate over Wisconsin's national leadership in high quality, student-focused education from elementary school through its public and private higher educational institutions.

We have always recognized that educators must adapt to meet changing student needs. So the Senate and Assembly committee hearings last week on virtual, on-line education weren't just timely. They were critical.

It's also not a new discussion in this state. I know. More than 40 years ago, I and 25 of my high school colleagues earned some of our high school credits through a nationally renowned distance learning program through the mail—a program created a century ago by UW-Extension.

Even though our instructors were 250 miles away from our homes in New Richland, we found the rigorous, advanced coursework and individualized attention we received from UW faculty gave us a wonderful, unique educational experience.

What's at stake today is an enormous and important enhancement of that "Wisconsin Idea."

Using the Internet as a vehicle, Wisconsin today has an opportunity to harness the energy of both the traditional public and new private sector schools to expand educational opportunity and increase student success.

But Internet-based instruction isn't just an important tool for expanding opportunity and personalizing Instruction. It's also a quantum leap in educational quality in response to new scientific research that demonstrates how students learn differently.

In recent years, scientists have been able to actually watch with imaging technology how the brain processes information. Substantial differences have been revealed in how individual brains solve problems, calling into doubt the notion that one type of learning style is appropriate for all students.

It is absolutely clear that for some students, Internet-based learning guided by a teacher and a mentor is actually superior to traditional schools. And, fortunately once again, innovators in Wisconsin have developed programs that meet the needs of students seeking opportunity not found in the traditional high school.

The Appleton and Grantsburg public school districts and private sector Insight Schools are leading the way toward innovation using online instruction. Insight Schools, related to the parent company of the hugely successful Phoenix University, has the capacity to offer nearly 170 online

courses taught by experienced educators—offering each student a personal student-focused educational experience.

The students Insight seeks to serve include several distinct groups ranging from advanced students seeking more challenging courses than are available at their local school, to students unable to attend local schools because of health, family or work issues.

Beyond those, Insight serves students who benefit from studying outside the traditional high school setting, working at their own speed, sometimes faster and some times slower than students in traditional high schools.

For those who see these schools as a threat to those traditional schools, Insight is particularly focused on helping students who were not in a public high school the year before enrolling at Insight. Instead of a threat, Insight is demonstrating how innovation can draw students back into an educational setting.

Budget issues have beset Wisconsin's school in recent years, forcing reductions in access to courses in many districts.

In these difficult circumstances, it is even more important that we use innovation—welcome nontraditional educational providers into the mix as we work to offer opportunity and the chance for success to all our young people seeking their high school degrees.

— David Olien, Senior UW-System Vice President Emeritus, serves as a member of the Insight Schools of Wisconsin advisory board.

The Monroe Times – Page 4a
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