

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS COME HOME

ONLINE EDUCATION IS CHANGING THE ROLES OF SCHOOLS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS

MARC EISEN

Fall 2002 marked the start of an important innovation in public education in Wisconsin. The first major statewide virtual school began operating from Appleton.

With great expectations but also considerable controversy, the Appleton Area School District began offering online K-8 classes through the Wisconsin Connections Academy to 269 students across the state, only 18 of whom actually reside in the Appleton school district.

These e-pioneers study at home under the direction of their parents, following a traditional text-based home school curriculum augmented by online enrichment and remedial exercises. A teacher back in Appleton monitors their progress through an online "learning management system" and talks to the family at least once a week.

The academy is run in partnership with a private, for-profit educational enterprise called Sylvan Learning Systems, which is best known for its 900 tutoring centers nationwide. Sylvan's corporate revenue is expected to exceed \$500 million this year.



Several other more modest ventures in e-learning are underway as well in Wisconsin this fall. Appleton has a separate e-high school for district-only students, as does the Monroe school district. CESA 9, a cooperative educational service agency based in Tomahawk, runs another cyber high school; this one contracts with districts to offer a cyber alter-

native. Like Appleton, Lake Mills also had an ambitious statewide program in mind (for K-5), but the school board pulled the plug for still unexplained reasons at the last minute.

If anything, Wisconsin is late to the e-learning game. Some 35 states are reportedly engaged in virtual learning. It is, by many accounts, The Next Big Thing in education, the product of technological innovation, the public's growing willingness to experiment with educational settings (a.k.a. charter schools), and the vibrant home schooling movement, which provides the perfect market for virtual schools to tap in recruiting students.

"The future is here," says Dan Bauer, the Monroe virtual school administrator. "We

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can't put our heads in the sand and hope it goes away. Virtual education is only going to get bigger."

Questions abound.

- Should the taxpayers be footing the bill for what, to critics, sounds suspiciously like homeschooling?
- Will homeschoolers, ever protective of their right to teach their kids as they see fit, find their freedom compromised by the state's foray into home education?
- Or is the academy a stalking horse for privatization, another blow aimed at the public schools?
- Finally, the most important question of all: Will virtual schools work for the kids?

Tom Scullen, the Appleton superintendent, considers himself an out-of-the box kind of educator. When he came to the 15,000-student district eight years ago after taking an early retirement from the Naperville, Illinois, superintendent's post, he felt that he and the Appleton school board were on the same page when it came to their shared belief in innovation.

"We feel the future of public education is not debates over private school vouchers and charters," the 64-year-old educator says.

It's collaboration with the community. It's more of let's get everybody involved. One size doesn't fit all. We have more than 20 business partnerships [in our schools]. We have banks in two of our high schools. We manage the childcare program for the Aid Association for Lutherans. We very much feel if you're going to meet the needs of children you've got to change the program for some.

Appleton opened its ninth charter school this fall, taking advantage of the state law that exempts innovative programs from many regulatory requirements. So if you have a really brainy kid, or one who's interested in the arts, or who might do better with a traditional "core knowledge" curriculum, or one who needs extra help to master the basics, or one who wants to work in the building trades, Appleton

has a specialized school for you. "We're seriously into parental choice," says Scullen.

The Wisconsin Connections Academy is just one more of those charter schools. Like the others, it is operated by the local district. The teachers and the principal are district employees. The students are treated as "open enrollment" students. That designation picks up on the statutory provision allowing parents to send their kids to a school outside their home district. (They must register, though, in the open enrollment period in February for the following fall, and the receiving school must have room for them.)

State funding for open enrollment kids averaged \$5,045 in the 2001-2002 school year. Appleton's deal with Sylvan calls for the company to receive \$3,499 per student; the remainder pays Appleton's costs for six teachers, a principal and special education services.

Sylvan, in turn, provides the students' families with a computer, printer, software, Internet service, and, most importantly, the curriculum. This is the Sylvan-owned Calvert homeschool program, which dates to 1906 and boasts of educating more than 400,000 students. Academy students will get the full panoply of books and texts that would go to Calvert's non-virtual homeschoolers, notes Sylvan's Barbara Dreyer. "It's a print-based curriculum," she says.

This is an important point, Dreyer adds. The academy isn't a cyber school, but a virtual school, set in homes, where the students spend more time off-line hitting the books than staring at a computer screen, she says. The parent's role is as a "learning coach," working with the Appleton school teacher and, if need be, a Sylvan curriculum specialist.

"It's a very teacher-focused system," says Scullen.

For older kids, you can have a pure cyber school where they log on and they're on their own. But with elementary students we came to the conclusion that we had to have a high degree of teacher input, and the parents had to work with them at home too.

The academy teachers regularly review student progress (that's where Sylvan's proprietary "learning management system" comes into play), Dreyer says, including periodic homework mailed to Appleton. The academy's strong point, she feels, is its ability to fashion an individualized learning plan for a student, slowing down the lessons when the student struggles with comprehension, then speeding through the material he or she learns quickly.

Though Calvert provides the core curriculum, it is supplemented by material to accommodate Wisconsin content standards. Academy students will also take the same standardized tests administered to other public school students in Wisconsin.

Those test sessions, to be proctored by school officials, will be among the occasions when academy students gather together at different meeting places across the state. Indeed, the academy is planning on hiring part-time community coordinators whose job it will be to organize group events such as field trips and extracurricular social activities.

Dreyer laughs when asked if Sylvan is losing money on the academy. "Oh yes, we're losing a substantial amount of money," she says. But Sylvan's goal is to develop a prototypical virtual program to be used in other states. No school district, she adds, could afford the millions that Sylvan has spent in developing an online program for monitoring student progress. "Appleton is certainly the launch point for us," she says.

Scullen is also looking to future applications.

We became convinced this [virtual education] is really coming down, and nobody know if it really works or not, or what the guidelines should be or how many teach-

ers you needed. We felt if we got in at the ground floor, on a pilot basis, we could pass it on to state agency. But by the time we got involved, virtual education was a lightning rod for criticism. Then the more questions we got, the more we became committed to the program.

Certainly, there's no shortage of questions. Up until mid-summer it was not even clear whether the state would allow the Wisconsin Connections Academy to open its cyber doors this fall.

With the Legislature paralyzed over the budget fix, the Assembly-Senate conference committee was poised over several potentially

ruinous decisions for the Appleton virtual school: bar funding altogether, place a two-year moratorium on the program, or restrict its operation to a three-county area. A major concern was how the K-8 virtual school would capitalize on two laws that were never intended to benefit online teaching — open enrollment and charter schools.

For example, the \$5,045 funding for open-enrollment students was predicated on the expens-

es incurred by bricks-and-mortar schools for services that don't apply to a virtual school: building maintenance, hot lunch, transportation, secretarial help, etc. The teacher-student ratio is also significantly higher at a virtual school, meaning that teacher costs are significantly lower.

Why, then, should virtual school students be financed according to a formula intended for bricks-and-mortar school students?

This question is at the heart of a threatened lawsuit by the state's largest teachers' union, the Wisconsin Education Association Council. WEAC believes the Legislature needs to address the finance issue directly (as well as

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the question of accountability) before charter virtual schools are allowed to operate.

“I do believe we will sue,” says WEAC legal counsel Lucy Brown. “We don’t believe what they’re doing is legal.”

State Representative John Lehman, meanwhile, raised a bigger issue: “To move into the home school realm with public dollars is a major change in education philosophy. It’s a huge step away from the common school that we’ve had for 150 or more years in this country.” A teacher himself for 25 years, the Racine Democrat says,

I put my faith in the primary school teacher who has been trained, knows curriculum and can give a big hug to Johnny or Susie. I think the value of young children coming together in a school is underestimated by cyber school proponents.

Michael Apple, a progressive-minded education professor at UW-Madison, makes a related point about virtual schools:

This is basically the tip of the iceberg. It’s like school vouchers in Milwaukee and Cleveland; we know what the agenda really is — to privatize education as much as possible.

Scullen is puzzled by the privatization charge. How is the Sylvan relationship, he asks, any different from the Appleton district buying textbooks from Houghton Mifflin, hot lunches from Aramark, or contracting with Jack’s for janitorial services?

“It’s a vendor relationship,” he says. “I think we should stick to the business of educating kids. I don’t want to be developing curriculum materials like Sylvan does.”

Besides, he asks, what’s wrong with privatization if it saves money and allows the district to focus its resources on teaching?

Lehman’s bill to curtail cyber schools went nowhere. And, in the end, the conference committee chose not to hamstring the Wisconsin Connections Academy, to the relief of Appleton and Sylvan officials.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI), meanwhile, had lots of questions about curriculum and funding; it even rejected a planning grant sought by the Appleton district. Scullen describes DPI’s attitude as “semi-confrontational,” but Deputy Superintendent Anthony Evers denies that. “Our goal was that they answer all the standard questions, questions that we put to anyone else. We don’t think that’s being a roadblock.”

Evers believes that the sponsors of the state’s open enrollment law never envisioned it being used by virtual schools. “Is that a brand new deal? Absolutely. But experimentation is okay, that’s what Wisconsin is all about. But we need to go into it with our eyes open.”

Out beyond the world of officialdom in Madison, it’s interesting to see how the advent of virtual education has prompted an outcry from anti-government activists on both the left and right — in particular, a just furious response from elements of Wisconsin’s homeschool community.

Homeschoolers are a tough, independent lot who had to wage a long battle before they won the right in Wisconsin (in the early 1980s) to educate their children at home. The state law is laissez-faire to the extreme. There is no effective state regulation of homeschooled kids. The law does call for students, in general, to receive at least 875 hours of instruction a year and to be taught a “sequentially progressive curriculum” in six subject areas. But the DPI has no authority to monitor homeschools. By many accounts, homeschooled kids have turned out just fine without DPI oversight.

Today there are approximately 2000 kids in homeschools in Wisconsin, and they were the prime recruitment target for both the Appleton and the now-cancelled Lake Mills virtual schools. (Lake Mills’ program vendor was to be K12 Inc., an educational software company founded by former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett.) Former homeschoolers make up half of the Appleton enrollment, according to Scullen. The Lake Mills percentage was reportedly even higher.

Homeschoolers were plied with direct mail and calls from telemarketers — in a misleading fashion, critics complain — to attend informational meetings early this year. The appeal was obvious. It sounded as if they could homeschool their children . . . and receive a free computer, printer, Internet connection and curriculum from the state.

Tanya Cunningham was angered by what she heard at an open house where K12 and Lake Mills school officials pitched the Wisconsin Virtual Academy. “These guys are full of malarkey,” she hoots. “They don’t care about kids or education. They’re just out to make money.”

Cunningham, who homeschools her 11-year-old son in Madison, describes herself as an anarchist.

Homeschoolers have opted out of government schools for one reason or another. Now, here’s something that will bring the government right into people’s homes.

The likely outcome, she adds, is “something unfavorable to homeschoolers — a lot more regulation and restrictions.”

Cunningham’s assessment is strikingly similar to conservative Julaine Appling’s. She is the executive director of the anti-abortion, pro-marriage Family Research Council and also serves on the Watertown school board. In recruiting students, the virtual schools “went to a pool of people who were like sitting ducks,” says Appling.

They packaged their offers in a way that unless you’re really astute you didn’t realize that you were becoming part of the public school system. What this has done is let the public schools come right into your living room.

The heaviest fire has come from the Wisconsin Parents Association, a stalwart group of 1400 homeschooling families, which (like Appling) urged the Legislature to place a moratorium on virtual schools. “Cyber charter schools would set a dangerous precedent of government regulation within our homes,” says executive director Larry Kaseman. Kaseman worries that the general public would “lump homeschoolers and cyber charter school students together and call them all homeschoolers.”

In his testimony to the Legislature, Kaseman pointed out that huge controversies have surrounded online schools in

Pennsylvania and Ohio. He warned that the same problems with accountability and quality could arise here, predicted that virtual schools will be a serious drain on Wisconsin taxpayers, and faulted Sylvan Ventures for its virtual school proposals having failed to pass muster in Minnesota, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Colorado.

Some of Kaseman’s charges appear wide of the mark. School finance experts at the DPI and UW-Madison don’t see major problems arising from state funding for virtual schools in Wisconsin. Sylvan’s Barbara Dreyer says Kaseman mischaracterizes the company’s experiences in other states: “Larry has not had much interest in the facts.”

Scullen has met with his homeschool critics, and he is unswayed by their criticism of the Connections Academy. “They’ve made a choice to homeschool. What gives them the right to say that somebody else can’t choose to do this?”

However the nature of the virtual schools may have been conveyed in the beginning,

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there's little doubt what the Wisconsin Connections Academy and the other more modest programs have now become: public schools pursuing a public curriculum in a new, experimental way.

This is significant, says Allan Odden, a UW-Madison professor of education.

They have to teach the Wisconsin standards, and the students have to take the state tests. This makes them different from the voucher schools in Milwaukee. The virtual schools have to abide by the public rules that private schools don't have to follow.

"There won't be religion, there won't be creationism in the curriculum," Oden adds. "There will be a solid mainstream curriculum."

Will it work? No one knows. Philip Freye, a Sauk Prairie science teacher who's pursuing a doctorate in education at Edgewood College in Madison, has reviewed the literature on virtual schools. "There's really not much research for high school programs and even less for grade schools," he says. He's studying the Appleton experiment for a doctoral paper. His suspicion is that hybrid programs like Appleton's — ones that mix online work with teacher contact — will prove more successful than straight cyber offerings.

Like other educators interviewed for this article, Freye feels that it is important for the public schools to take up the challenge of providing virtual learning. "It could be the future of how public education serves more children," he says.

There could be real cost savings, too, given fewer teachers, fewer buildings, reduced transportation costs, and other distinctive features of e-schools. But at the same time, fewer kids would be lost to homeschooling. This is an important point if public schools are to remain pre-eminent in an educational environment where parents can easily opt out of the system.

"What should WEAC be doing? The smart thing is for them to jump on board or run the risk of being left behind," says Freye. "Virtual education is going to come. Most of the teachers I talk to shrug their shoulders and say: 'Let's give it a go.'"

Odden is upbeat about the prospects.

It's an interesting experiment. It's kind of nice that you have a lot of people who want to try it out. These are mainstream, hardworking educators trying to improve the system. It gives me confidence that people like that are involved.