

NOSD considers virtual program for 4K

Written by Mark Jaeger

Wednesday, 30 December 2009 18:11

On-line offering one of changes being mulled to give district competitive statewide edge

The Northern Ozaukee School District may expand its virtual school program to include 4-year-old kindergarten.

Supt. Bill Harbron discussed the possibility during a board workshop last week, outlining the curriculum materials offered by a virtual-school innovator called Lincoln Interactive.

If approved, it would become the first 4K virtual program in Wisconsin.

Earlier in the month, the School Board approved revisions to the virtual school charter agreement that guides the operation of Wisconsin Virtual Learning. Those changes include the possibility of expanding the on-line school to include the early kindergarten.

The district-run virtual program currently serves students from 5-year-old kindergarten through high school, with an enrollment of about 800 from around the state.

The district took over full operation of the statewide virtual school this year. For the first six years, the program was operated in partnership with curriculum provider K12, Inc.

One of the reasons the district dissolved its partnership with K12 was that it wanted to be able to use a variety of curriculums to address student needs.

This year materials have been used from Calvert Educational Services, Florida Virtual School and Aventa Learning.

While studying the options available to virtual programs, district officials took great interest in the Lincoln Interactive program developed by National Network of Digital Schools.

One of those modules is the Little Lincoln program, which includes curriculum for the lower elementary school levels starting at 4-year-old kindergarten.

The 4K curriculum will first be available for the 2010-11 school year, and the district has been promised exclusive rights to offer it in Wisconsin.

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To provide the program, the district had to expand its charter agreement to include 4K.

“Including it in our charter doesn’t mean we will be offering it, but it is something we are seriously looking at and this would be the first step,” Harbron told the board.

During the workshop, Harbron talked to board members about the trials of taking over the virtual program.

“Like every start-up venture, we probably hit every bump in the road, especially during the first six weeks,” he said.

“When we contracted with K12, it put us on the cutting edge of education but they basically managed the program for those first six years. Then, under new ownership, they changed the focus of their company to an emphasis on keeping their numbers up.”

After encountering problems, Harbron said the district connected with the operators of the Pennsylvania Cyber School.

The program is the largest virtual school in Pennsylvania, teaching more than 10,000 students.

The school, based in Midland, Pa., is the originator of the Little Lincoln program. The curriculum integrates a variety of resources, including interactive radio broadcasts and a children’s television program called “Meet at the Great Tree” which is tentatively scheduled to begin airing in Milwaukee in January.

Harbron was told tying into the mass media connection could bring as many as 200 new students to the district’s virtual program.

“This could be a niche that makes us stand out from other virtual programs,” he said.

The influx of students could be crucial for the district, Harbron said, because K12 is expected to be very aggressive in marketing its statewide virtual school during the upcoming open enrollment period. The company switched affiliations from

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Northern Ozaukee to the McFarland School District at the start of this school year.

Harbron said his contacts with virtual school operators from other states has opened his eyes to more efficient ways to educate in a virtual environment.

He said one approach to implement the new curriculum would be to create separate “academies” under the Wisconsin Virtual Learning umbrella, following different provider courses.

Harbron said consideration is being given to revising the organization of the virtual learning model in the district, introducing the position of “student learning advocate” to ease the burden on the teaching staff.

“We could make these changes without adding to the staff, and follow the student-centered model ... of service, support and learning,” he said.

In approving the revised charter agreement, the board agreed to extend its coverage through the 2014-15 school year.

Board member Rick Hamm cast the only vote against revising the agreement.