

Officials tour state, stressing what sets Wisconsin Virtual Learning apart

Wisconsin's open enrollment period, which runs from Feb. 1 to 19, gives schools around the state a chance to beef up their numbers by adding students from outside their district boundaries.

For the Northern Ozaukee School District, the process is the lifeblood of its virtual charter school, Wisconsin Virtual Academy.

Northern Ozaukee officials are doing much more than crossing their fingers and hoping parents register their children for the on-line school in the coming weeks.

They are traveling the state, hosting 27 open-house gatherings, including eight sessions in southeastern Wisconsin. The final informational gathering will be from 9:30 to 11 a.m. Thursday, Feb. 18, on the Fredonia campus.

The next day is the deadline for parents to file applications for the 2010-11 school year.

There are 14 virtual schools operating in the state, but Wisconsin Virtual Learning is one of only two programs that offers classes for kindergarten through high school.

The other full-range program is the Wisconsin Virtual Academy, a name which the Northern Ozaukee School District used when it started its program six years ago. It has since been taken over by K12, Inc., the Virginia-based curriculum provider that initially partnered with the Fredonia district.

Northern Ozaukee officials have been refining their program to differentiate it from other virtual offerings, expanding curriculum choices and agreeing to start a 4-year-old kindergarten program next year.

That option has given life to the school's new slogan: "Selecting Wisconsin Virtual Learning is a 13-year investment that will mold a lifetime."

Earlier this month, the Northern Ozaukee School Board approved a two-year contract with Little Lincoln, a curriculum provider that has crafted materials for students in kindergarten through second grade.

The program incorporates characters and concepts introduced on a children's

educational television program titled “Meet Me at the Great Tree.” The morning series, which is produced by the National Network of Digital Schools, debuted locally Jan. 11 on Milwaukee’s My 24 TV.

Much like Sesame Street from a previous generation, the program uses recurring characters in the fictional community of Midlandia to teach a standards-based curriculum as well as lessons in social interaction.

Wisconsin Virtual Learning has exclusive rights in the state to use materials that tie-in with the educational program, a distinction which officials hope will pay off in a surge of interest in the virtual school.

“It is important that WVL distinguish itself from other statewide virtual school providers in Wisconsin,” Supt. Bill Harbron told the School Board.

“Little Lincoln is a comprehensive, standards-based curriculum for elementary students that combines on-line and off-line components designed to maximize active engagement. The curriculum offers students the opportunity to become part of the interactive online world where they are exposed to engaging, fun and educational videos, games, stories, songs and more.”

Officials believe the affiliation with Little Lincoln has the potential to draw 200 new students to WVL. If that number holds up, it could mean an additional \$320,000 in state aid for the district.

The district has also agreed to use materials from Lincoln Interactive, which offers more than 250 on-line courses for middle and high schools. The courses are designed for students capable of completing self-paced, independent study, in such diverse subjects as world languages, fine arts, business, technology and multimedia.

The charter program also offers materials from several other curriculum providers, including K12, Calvert, Verticy Learning, Aventa and Florida Virtual.

Harbron said having a library of materials means the program is better able to tailor courses to the strengths and needs of its virtual students.

Harbron was candid in assessing the lessons the district learned this year in operating the virtual program without the assistance of K12, Inc., its original

Open enrollment crucial to NOSD

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partner.

“During the first six months of operation, Wisconsin Virtual Learning has experienced all of the initial start-up difficulties experienced by new virtual schools. The most significant is not achieving the enrollment goal,” he said.

With nearly 1,200 students applying for the program during last year’s open enrollment, officials anticipated 840 of those students would be taking virtual classes this year.

As of last month, the program had 792 students.

The open enrollment period is also available to students who attend “brick and mortar” schools, but Northern Ozaukee has tends to lose more students than it gains in that process.

Last year, 28,028 students in the state transferred to schools outside their home districts.

“Whenever we enter the open enrollment period, we hope people look at our district in a positive light. It comes down to seeing the advantages of a smaller-school vs. a larger school setting,” Harbron said.

The district conducts interviews with all local parents who choose to send their children to other school districts, and the rationale is usually predictable.

“In most cases, it is a matter of convenience for the family rather than being something negative about the district,” Harbron said.