

Quirks of state enrollment cap have NOSD banking on middle ground for on-line school staffing

Even though the restrictions never came into play, the threat of the state-imposed enrollment cap on students in virtual schools has apparently taken its toll on the Wisconsin Virtual Learning program operated by the Northern Ozaukee School District.

District officials had entered the state's open enrollment period last month expecting as many as 1,100 virtual students would sign up for the Fredonia district's on-line program.

While the district is unsure how many students will be taking classes through the virtual charter school in fall, officials concede the actual numbers are likely to be well short of that goal.

In anticipation of the shortfall, the School Board recently reviewed three staffing scenarios using student counts of 650, 750 and 850.

During the open enrollment process, students had the option of naming three virtual schools in which they would consider enrolling. The choices were given in case one of the selected programs was filled.

In cases where students named three virtual programs, there is no way of knowing in advance which school they would choose if all three have openings.

Legislation enacted last year set a statewide cap of 5,250 students in virtual programs, so officials said many parents completed open-enrollment forms in case they decide that is the route they want to take for their child.

District officials said 948 new students listed Wisconsin Virtual Academy as one of their open-enrollment choices, but experience has shown only a fraction of those students end up enrolling in the program.

School officials are also contacting families of the program's current 760 students to see how many plan to continue with the program.

Uncertainty clouds virtual count

Written by Mark Jaeger

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With enrollment counts very much in flux, officials said they were forced into staffing a program while in the dark about final student counts.

“The uncertainty is the same for virtual schools across the state. It’s the game the state has set up for us with the cap,” Supt. Bill Harbron said.

The School Board ultimately chose to follow a middle ground for anticipated virtual enrollment, projecting the target count at 750 students.

That enrollment level and the introduction of a student learning assistant to work with parents and handle technical duties will allow the district to slash its virtual teaching staff from 24 teachers this year to 12 next year.

Enrollment in the virtual school, which serves children in 4-year-old kindergarten through 12th grade, has a significant impact on brick-and-mortar programs in the district.

That fact was magnified this year when a higher-than-anticipated withdrawal rate from the on-line program left the district far short of anticipated state aids.

Staffing for the virtual program during the 2009-10 school year was based on an enrollment of 842, but by January the actual count had fallen to 758 students.

According to officials, that means the district will receive \$353,000 less in aid from the state than projected.

While the virtual program continues to generate enough revenue to pay for staffing and curriculum costs, the reduced revenue will mean the district will not be able to build its fund balance as anticipated.

The Finance Committee learned last month that the district is likely to end the year with a fund balance equal to 2.5% of its operating expenses.

Last year, the board set a goal of having a fund balance of 5% of its budget by June 2011. The state has recommended districts maintain a balance of between 15% and 30%, but officials have said the only way Northern Ozaukee will be able to

boost its fund balance is by creating alternative revenue sources like the virtual program.

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School Board President Paul Krause said it is not known how reliable a source of income the virtual program will be in the future, especially as competing programs emerge.

Krause said there is a risk that virtual enrollment will not pan out as projected, again creating a budget crunch.

“We have the potential, no matter how hard we try, to be set up for the same situation again next year,” he told the board.