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If state grant is approved, charter students could immerse themselves in rigorous on-line curriculum

Facing the deadline of the state's open-enrollment period next month, the Northern Ozaukee School Board gave the green light last week to pursuing a grant that would greatly enhance the science offerings of its virtual high-school program.

If the district can secure a charter school grant from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, an independent high school called the STEM Academy would be created with a science-heavy curriculum starting in the 2011-12 school year.

The program draws its names from its areas of focus — Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.

The grant would cover the cost of curriculum and materials — but not staff — for the first three years of the academy.

If the program is created, it would support itself with the student aid collected by the district, officials said.

The description of the program says it is "designed to engage highly motivated students in an academically rigorous curriculum, with a strong focus on science, technology, engineering and math."

Coursework is intended for students who plan to continue studies in technical fields after high school.

The curriculum uses 20-unit modules to introduce students to real-world applications of scientific principles in such fields as biotechnology, forensics, genetics, sports medicine, epidemiology and stem cell research.

Energy studies would cover such areas as solar technologies and biofuels, while applied science would focus on automotive, mechanical, electrical and civil engineering.

The curriculum, called the Cutting Edge Science program, was developed by Lincoln Interactive, a national provider of virtual school materials.

The program has connections with the Los Alamos National Laboratory, Carnegie Mellon University, the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association, Genetics Policy Institute, Biopharmaceutical Technology Center Institute, McGee Women's Research Institute, ReachBio and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine Center.

The challenging four-year academic program would require students to earn 26.5 credits to graduate. At least 12 of those credits would be in the areas of advanced math, cutting-edge

science and technology.

The National Network of Digital School, which has been partnering with the district in the operation of its virtual program, is assisting in the grant writing and will help develop the program.

“The catch is, if we don’t receive the grant, there is no program,” Supt. Bill Harbron told the board.

If the DPI grant is approved, it is expected that the board will take action on the charter for the new virtual school in May.

The board was pushed to give its conceptual approval to the STEM Academy last week, so it could be promoted in advance of the state’s open enrollment period which runs from Feb. 7 to 25.

After that time, students are not allowed to enroll in academic programs outside their home district.

The program will be marketed along with the traditional Wisconsin Virtual Learning program, with the warning that it might not be available.

If the STEM Academy is created, brick-and-mortar students will be able to take specific courses not available at the high school.

Although the district’s virtual program pulls students from across the state, Harbron said it is unlikely the STEM Academy would appeal to more than 20 students because of the challenging courses.

“This is such a niche, we are not really sure how many students this would attract,” he said.

Board member Tom Hoffmann said the program presents an opportunity.

“We would be doing a disservice to our kids if we didn’t try to offer this,” Hoffmann said.