

New look to virtual school takes shape

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Reorganization gives independent board say over charter program

In a slight course adjustment, the nonprofit organization Wisconsin Virtual Learning Inc. will operate the Northern Ozaukee School District's online charter school next year.

The Northern Ozaukee School Board unanimously approved a revised charter ordinance at its meeting this month, clearing the way for the virtual program's staff to become employees of WVL Inc.

Up until this point, the virtual staff was employed by the Northern Ozaukee School District.

As part of the program reorganization for next school year, the independent Wisconsin Virtual Learning Board will be responsible for operating the virtual program.

That four-member board met for the first time June 9, endorsing the revised charter agreement.

The composition of that board was determined by the school district's administrative team and representatives of the Pennsylvania-based National Network of Digital Schools, which has been working with the district in reorganizing the virtual program.

"The board members were appointed with an emphasis on individuals with a shared vision of virtual schooling," said Melissa Horn, the program's new executive director.

Horn had been principal of WVL's K4-8 program.

The WVL Board president is Terry Weingrod, who has extensive background with the educational consortium CESA 1 and is currently a consultant with Wisconsin Education Innovations.

Other board members include Tony Shafer, chairman of the undergraduate teacher-education program at Cardinal Stritch University, and Julie Fraser, a southwest Wisconsin resident and parent of three children enrolled in WVL.

The only board not from Wisconsin is Mike Conti, director of administrative services at PA Cyber, a Pennsylvania virtual school with more than 10,000 students.

Ultimately, WVL Inc. will enter into a service agreement with the National Network of Digital Schools for support in operating the on-line program.

Under the initial plan, teachers and administrators of the virtual program were going to become employees of NNDS.

Horn said the decision to make the virtual staff employees of WVL, Inc. was made to simplify the process.

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“We are mostly from Wisconsin, so we felt it made sense to have an entity from Wisconsin lead the program. The laws here are very different than in Pennsylvania. Having WVL employ the staff is going to be a lot cleaner,” Horn told the School Board.

Although the virtual program’s board held its initial meeting face-to-face, Horn said future sessions will be electronic, in keeping with the program’s commitment to technology.

In a related matter, Supervisor of Business Support Jason Becker reported that “considerable progress” had been made in tracking down laptop computers loaned to virtual students.

At one point, the district was unable to track down more than 130 laptop computers that were distributed to students in the virtual program during the past two school years.

Becker said about half of those missing computers have been recovered and the number could be reduced to as few as 30 by July.

“We know where they are now. We are trying to reclaim them before sending them to collection,” he said.