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**Guest opinion: Online courses make possibilities virtually limitless**

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Every year, tens of thousands of Iowa students are denied the opportunity to learn simply because of where they live. Faced with geographic, staffing or budgetary constraints, their school districts simply cannot offer the courses they need to prepare themselves for college or work.

It doesn't have to be this way. Other states have instituted robust systems of online course work that remedy most of these issues for their students. For example, the Florida Virtual School served over 200,000 students this past year. In contrast, here in Iowa only a few thousand students take an online course each year. Other states, such as Alabama, Missouri and Utah, educate online tens of thousands of students.

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Statewide providers such as the Iowa Department of Education, the Iowa Online AP Academy and Kirkwood Community College offer only a few dozen online courses. Some school districts, such as Des Moines and Sioux City, are supplementing these meager offerings by contracting with outside institutions for online classes. While all of this is better than not allowing students to take online courses at all, the overall level is still far below what is needed.

Who benefits from online course work? Bright students who are ready for advanced classes that aren't offered locally and struggling students who need a different kind of class experience typically prosper in online classes.

Homeschooled children, incarcerated youth and students who are homebound because of illness also are prime candidates for online instruction. Whether they're credit recovery courses that allow teenagers to stay in school rather than dropping out or specialty courses, such as Astronomy, Mandarin, and AP European History, we now have the ability to offer a rich, diverse curriculum to every student in Iowa.

Many people still believe online classes are inferior to face-to-face instruction. A recent United States Department of Education meta-analysis of online learning studies dispels that myth. The researchers found students in wholly or partially online learning environments exhibit academic achievement equivalent to - and often better than - those in traditional classrooms. Other studies have shown students in online courses feel as connected to their teachers as those in face-to-face settings.

The number of elementary and secondary students who take online courses is doubling every three or four years. Most states can't scale up fast enough to meet demand. Clearly parents and students are satisfied with the quality of these online learning programs. Our own experiences as adults in work-related or university courses also confirm the sufficiency and power of these online environments.

Several challenges must be addressed if we are to take the steps necessary to move our state forward on this front:

- Create virtual high schools. Iowa's approach has been to allow several different institutions to offer a few online courses each. Other states have instead implemented one or more virtual high schools that serve students statewide. Our approach isn't necessarily inferior, but it requires much greater coordination, results in potential course redundancy, and makes it more difficult for students and parents to collect information about online opportunities.

- Stop school districts from vetoing students' ability to take online courses. Right now, state-level policies allow districts to refuse to accept online courses for credit. A centralized accreditation entity that possessed greater knowledge than individual school administrators of online course providers would allow students to take classes from a variety of different educational institutions while still ensuring course quality.

- Make the most of qualified teachers beyond state borders. We have to get over the idea that a qualified teacher or course only can reside within our state borders. The online world knows no geographic boundaries. High-quality classes and instructors could easily come from other states, countries, or universities besides our own. We must re-examine our beliefs about teacher and course quality in light of technological advances and the abundance of learning opportunities that reside on the Web.

There's a final benefit worth noting: Not only will students and Iowa benefit as a whole from greater online opportunities, but so will teachers. Online instruction allows interested instructors to specialize in particular topics or work after retirement. Teachers also can gain greater job flexibility by working part-time while on family leave or at home for part of their week. Most statewide virtual schools report surpluses of applicants for online teaching positions.

Mostly, however, we just need more. More online learning opportunities for more students. In the end, it comes down to our collective will as a state. Are our legislators willing to fund greater educational opportunities for our children? Are we citizens ready to accept that online learning must be an important component of our students' learning? We can continue to ignore these powerful educational environments or we can step into the 21st century. Which will we choose?

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