

Fact Sheet

Virtual Schools

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Virtual Schools, or e-schools, are a new concept in education. They have taken elements from public schools, charter schools and homeschooling and fused them together. Charter schools are public schools, administered by local school boards. They must submit to the state requirements of all public schools. Enter two private companies – Wisconsin Connections Academy (operated by Sylvan Ventures and using Calvert materials) and Wisconsin Virtual Academy (using the K-12 curriculum.) WCA is operating through Appleton School District. The Northern Ozaukee School Board has agreed to implement the K-12 program. Both companies have aggressively targeted homeschoolers in their marketing.

Here is how it would work: My son, Logan, lives in Eau Claire and is presently homeschooling. I attend a “sales” meeting sponsored by K-12. At this meeting Bill Bennett tells me his curriculum will “make my children smart.” (His exact words.) Before the February 22nd deadline, I fill out an application form and submit it to Northern Ozaukee School District. I now have until June 6th to make a final decision. I like the concept, fill out a 17 page form, and submit it to NOSD. Logan is placed in a grade according to his age, though I can have him test on line in each subject to see where he is. In August, we receive boxes of materials, a computer, printer and payment for an internet connection. A teacher, hired by NOSD, begins regular contact with me. Each day, Logan does his school work on the computer, and does other activities suggested by the program off the computer. He does this at home, with me. Each day, the NOSD teacher assigned to us can access his work and view it. Each day, I must spend time on the computer downloading the lessons, determining how we will use the materials, and tabulating the assessments. Every other week the teacher will call me and we will spend perhaps half an hour discussing Logan’s work.

Sound good? There are glitches:

++ **Who pays for this?** Approximately \$5,100 in tax money (67% of which is state tax money) follows Logan to NOSD. 5% of that sum (\$225 per child) becomes an “oversight fee” which NOSD can keep to use for their own district. Some portion of the remaining \$4875 is used to pay staff positions to administer the K-12 program. Some portion of that money is paid to K-12 to “purchase” materials and services. By all estimates, K-12 makes a tidy profit. The student’s home district gets to keep the other \$3,000 to \$4,000 assigned to each student in Wisconsin – and do absolutely nothing for Logan. This seems a rather painless way for school districts to attain some extra dollars.

++ **What if this program doesn’t work well for Logan? After all, I have learned in the last few years of homeschooling that finding the right program for his learning style and personality often has meant**

experimentation. The good news is that students do not spend the majority of their time in front of the computer – the estimate is 20% for the lower grades. But they do have to use the K-12 program in all subject areas – whether the family agrees with the content or not, whether it works effectively for that child or not. There are a wide range of activities which can supplement the lesson, but the basic lesson needs to be followed. The enrichment of intergenerational unit studies and projects with the family is replaced with grade specific teaching tracks for each child.

++ **How is attendance taken?** Unlike homeschoolers, public school attendance is counted in hours per day, *not* days. After listening to two different K-12 instructors speak, it is clear that K-12 doesn’t really know yet how time spent doing learning activities will be tabulated in Wisconsin. There are many unanswered questions in this area. It is clear, however, that parents will have to be very accountable for all schooling time required by this curriculum. The study of subjects or materials you wish to do outside of this curriculum will not “count.” Tracking the number of minutes per subject separates schooling from the daily process of living life – something we don’t want to do. We understand learning to be an integral part of living – not separate from daily life.

++ **My student has to be tested?** Yes. This is not homeschooling in Wisconsin. This is public schooling occurring at home. Students will have to take the standardized tests all public school students have to take. It is very important to K-12 that the students look good in this testing – it surely will impress school officials and convince more people to use the curriculum. The K-12 presenter warned that if a student strays from the curriculum as presented, they may not do as well on the standardized testing. So we are designing the curriculum to teach to the test - something most homeschoolers understand to be counter-productive in learning life skills, resourcing and decision making.

++ **But this looks like homeschooling.** It sure does. Students are attending school at home under the immediate supervision of their parents. When the lady next door sees Logan out in the yard at 12:30 on a school day what does she think? He’s homeschooling. When you are shopping at 11:00am and someone asks if you are off school for today, are you going to answer “I virtual school” or say “I homeschool?” This looks very confusing to those who do not clearly understand the differences.

++ **It sounds like K-12 will have a lot of personal information about Logan, and our family.** Yes, and so far we are not impressed with their credibility in this area. Both Sylvan and K-12 have openly accessed lists of homeschoolers in Wisconsin and solicited them. Think of all the information the company will have on Logan – his learning style, interests, strengths and weaknesses,

aspects of his home life, etc. Further, the 17 page enrollment contract, according to one article I read, includes information such as health and immunization records, non-enrolled sibling information, family income and a photo release.

K-12 is one of many companies owned by **Knowledge Universe**. KU's intention is to make money by selling information over the Internet to serve people "from cradle to grave." These companies are amassing a huge data base that includes the names, skill levels and interests of people using their products or services. This information can be used by other KU companies. Think of all the data they now have on Logan for future sales of their products! A professor at Arizona State University who has just completed a study on such companies states, "These virtual schools will use the information as a vehicle to market education products to parents. There is very little possibility that they won't tie this in to the marketing of educational toys and educational trips to parents. It's basically an infomercial."

I read an article from the statewide homeschooling organization in Idaho. It stated, "The student's home is regarded as a satellite campus potentially subject to inspection or monitoring by district personnel and other governmental agencies. In other states [Alaska is an example] where virtual charter schools have been established, curriculum audits and home visits, though not initially required, have been mandated after the system was put in place. In some cases the type of contractual arrangement under which the Academy operates has been used by social services personnel to force home inspections." Further, K-12 is sure of itself. When in Milwaukee, Bill Bennett was asked about a legal challenge to K-12 and the school district. His response? "Bring on the lawsuits. K-12 will fund the defense."

++ Why would someone want to do virtual e-schooling rather than homeschooling as we now know it in Wisconsin? There are probably lots of answers. One of the concepts that the K-12 presenters stressed was that "K-12 fills in all the missing gaps in learning." What a great line! It feeds right into all the insecurities homeschool parents have that we just aren't quite teaching everything we should, or everything everyone else is covering. Wouldn't it be better if a professional watched over us, we reason? In truth, we probably haven't missed much. Specific information can always be located. When homeschooling we are graced with the ability to focus on such concepts as problem solving, learning manners, sharing the morals and values of our family, and relating to people of all ages.

No doubt for some the fact that it is free would be of great appeal. However, one can homeschool very effectively on a few hundred dollars a year or less, and not trade in flexibility and freedom to educate as best for each child. The public school driven K-12 curriculum may appear to be easy to use, but it is consuming for the parent, who must devote considerable time each day to planning and record keeping, as well as working with their child. I quote from a mom who used this curriculum. "I thought I would like being accountable because I got in my thinking that after 4 years of homeschooling I wanted a break from figuring out my own curriculum. I got in my head that I wasn't doing enough. I was so wrong. If my experience [with using K-12] has taught me anything, it is that I was doing a fantastic job on my own."

++ What appeals to NOSD about administering this curriculum? As best as I can determine, interim superintendent Harbron is not only attracted by the financial gain, but the opportunity to be viewed as a forward looking, innovative school district, and the hope of using elements of this curriculum in other areas of the district's programs. The majority of the school board members spoke to "filling the needs of special students who are not served well by the district." Another words, they saw this mostly in terms of special needs students! (That is not an accurate portrayal of the homeschooling population at all!) One board member clearly wants more controls on and jurisdiction over homeschoolers.

++ Can e-school students participate in sports and other extra-curricular activities as they are now public school students? Superintendent Harbron made it clear that K-12 students belong to a separate school, thus may not participate in district activities.

These programs may give school officials the long-awaited opportunity to increase their control and regulation of homeschoolers. The K-12 presenter recognized that Wisconsin law may very well end up changing and becoming stricter as it is applied to those who e-school (which could easily bleed over to all other state homeschoolers.) In Alaska, where large numbers of home educators have enrolled in virtual charter schools, the popularity of the state program has been used to redefine private home education. Because the state model of restrictive education within the home has become the "standard," movements have begun to change existing laws to require the same regulations for *private* home educators. Therefore, the decision of individual families to elect to use the state program has eroded the freedoms of those who choose not to participate.