MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION • DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

EAST LANSING • MICHIGAN • 48824-1034

February 1, 2006

The Honorable Brian Palmer, Chair
House Education Committee
Michigan House of Representatives
885 House Office Building
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Representative Palmer:

I am writing to express my support for the proposal in House Bill 5606 to require that every student complete some form of online learning experience prior to graduation from high school.

My support for this proposal is based on my experience as a parent, a former high school teacher and a faculty member at Michigan State University, where I have been extensively involved in the College of Education's completely online masters degree in education. I also serve on the University's Instructional Computing and Technology Committee. Recently I have been involved in research on online learning at the Michigan Virtual High School.

The most fundamental point I would like to make to your committee is that online learning is growing rapidly in all aspects of education from K-12 to higher education and has profound implications for lifelong learning. This growth in online learning will continue and accelerate. The importance of online learning must be seen as part of the new global economy as described by Thomas Friedman in his book, The World is Flat, where the unprecedented growth of the Web is changing the economic landscape. Michigan's students must understand that in this new world they will be required to continue to learn for the rest of their lives. And much of that learning, in school and beyond, will take place via online learning experiences via the Web.

This is not a world that most of us grew up in. I never took an online course in high school or as an undergraduate or as a graduate student. But six years ago I, along with many other faculty at MSU, found myself participating in the creation of a completely online master of arts in education degree. This program engaged the faculty in developing and teaching online courses. The program has grown rapidly and we are working hard to meet demand. During this same period the entire University has seen a remarkably rapid growth in the use of course management systems as part of courses taught on campus, with more and more courses including online discussions, readings, lectures, and examinations. A recent study found that nationwide universities are seeing this pattern of rapid growth in online learning.

The K-12 sector is seeing similarly rapid growth in online learning, both as a component of traditional courses as well as in completely online courses. A recent study of K-12 learning (Watson, 2005) found that over half of all states have developed policies and programs for online programs.

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Let me offer a personal experience with the potential of online learning tools in K-12 education. When my daughter was taking physics at East Lansing High School three years ago, her physics teacher assigned homework problems using the LON-CAPA system that created unique problems for each student online. The students were encouraged to talk to each other, by phone or IM chat, as they worked to solve the problems. Their answers were scored immediately and if incorrect, they were given hints and allowed to try again. As a parent I was amazed at the quality of conversation taking place at night in my home between my daughter and her classmates about complex physics problems. This online experience is but one example of the new world of e-learning that is now available. My daughter is now a junior at the University of Michigan and she tells me that almost all of her courses have online components. She downloads lectures, PowerPoint slides, and participates in online discussions in many courses.

Before going to graduate school, I taught physics and chemistry in Atlanta, Georgia, and thoroughly enjoyed teaching. But I often think how much more I could have done as a teacher with the astonishing resources that are now available on the Web. I also would spend more of my time as a teacher coaching students on how to learn via the Web outside of the 9:00 to 3:00 Monday through Friday period they spend in school.

As I look at the other requirements included in House Bill 5606 for higher standards for science and mathematics and other subjects, I would encourage you to recognize that the requirement of at least one learning experience online can open up possibilities for learning in support of improved learning of all subject matters.

The future will reward individuals and societies that harness the power of the Web and elearning to continually expand their ability to add value through innovation and creativity. Many countries around the world realize this and are investing in high-speed connectivity in homes and schools. Access to the Internet has also grown rapidly, if somewhat less systematically, in Michigan.

We must create K-12 experiences for the children of Michigan that open up their eyes to the educational potential of online learning. Today's high school students will still be in the workplace in 2056. Given the changes we have seen in online learning in the past five years, no one can fully imagine the world in 2056, but it is certain that today's students will need to learn for the rest of their lives... in school, at home, and in the workplace. And the ability to learn online from the abundance of educational experiences on the Web is truly a requirement for being an educated citizen in the future.

Thank you for this opportunity to share these thoughts.

Sincerely,

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