Outdated thinking stands in way of online learning

By Michael Van Beek
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Enrollment in online schools is growing nationally by about 30% each year. Unfortunately, outdated rules and regulations in Michigan stand in the way of schools unleashing the full potential of digital learning.

There are several misconceptions about digital learning. The concept of placing kids in front of a computer and expecting them to learn turns some people cold to the idea of digital learning.

The president of the Michigan Education Association, Steven Cook, invoked this image recently, likening online learning to spending an entire day staring at a computer screen. But that's not how digital learning works.

Digital learning is really about individually customized instruction, improved learning assessments and expanded access. Using technology, instruction can be tailored to students' unique needs, allowing them to progress at their own pace. Comprehension can be measured in real time and fed back to teachers instantaneously. With the Internet, all students, no matter where they live, can access the best teachers, instruction and programs.

Andrew Vanden Heuvel, a college and high school physics teacher, recently told me, "I really think online education is superior to the classroom in a variety of ways."

Several schools in Michigan already are using digital learning to their students' advantage. The Berrien Springs and Suttons Bay districts operate digital learning programs that successfully serve at-risk students and students who have dropped out of school. Oxford schools are implementing "blended learning" models that combine face-to-face and online elements of teaching to provide individually paced and customized instruction accessible anywhere.

Districts such as these would like to innovate further and give more students the option to benefit from digital learning, but outdated state regulations stand in the way. Conceived before the advent of the Internet, these rules are rooted in the idea that learning must happen at a particular place and time.

Schools, for example, must provide 1,098 hours of instruction and may receive funding only for students physically present on count days.

A superintendent recently said his district might not receive funding for online students if they are not logged in at the same time of day as their peers are studying in the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom. Such rules snuff out the advantages of the "any time, any place, any way, any pace" learning models that Gov. Rick Snyder called for earlier this year.

The Legislature should eliminate all related "seat-time" requirements and move to a competency-based funding model, where schools are rewarded based on student mastery of subject material.

Moreover, school performance should be assessed based on individual student learning gains, which is easily measurable in digital learning environments.

With students progressing through the curriculum at their own pace -- perhaps enrolled in both eighth-grade English and 11th-grade math -- assessments based on standardized test averages don't tell us much.

There is still a long road ahead to provide student and parents with an individualized education and more learning opportunities. But with digital learning, we're closer to this goal than ever before, and policymakers should do their part.

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