



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Catharine Young

Senate Passes Virtual Learning Bill

CATHARINE YOUNG June 24, 2013

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Bill creates online learning advisory committee to explore online and blended learning

ALBANY— A bill passed in the Senate (S.5509-A), and sponsored by Senator Catharine Young (R, I, C—Olean), would help rural school districts dramatically increase course offerings for students by taking steps toward the creation of a statewide online and blended learning program.

Online and blended learning initiatives, often referred to as virtual learning, provide schools with cost-effective opportunities to use technology to offer students access to courses otherwise not available.

“Imagine classrooms where students are able to receive instruction and network with world-renowned scholars, scientists, artists and musicians from across the state, without the need to be in the same room. A statewide system of virtual learning would provide amazing opportunities for students, especially for those attending schools in rural districts. Students could take on the challenges of unique college preparatory courses or learn more about specific career paths. School districts could provide access to music, art or foreign language programs that extend well beyond their normal offerings,” Senator Young said.

There have been a number of successful online and blended learning programs in parts of Upstate New York and New York City, and there is a demonstrated need for a statewide program to encourage the delivery of these courses.

“A challenge that has faced our school for many years is being able to provide our students with a rigorous curriculum. We have had excellent students not be accepted at highly-accredited colleges because we have not been able to offer advanced placement and college-level courses. To meet this challenge, our district has initiated many technological advances, (including a one-to-one iPad initiative), that will enable our teachers to teach and our students to access such advanced placement and college-level courses. Our goal is that our students have the opportunity to graduate with transcripts that reflect upper-level, demanding courses,” said Peter Morgante, Superintendent of Pine Valley Central School District.

“I believe that this is a positive and vital step in insuring that all students are provided with the opportunity to access coursework which would not otherwise be available to them. The utilization of online and blended learning is a tool which will help to insure that students from small, rural schools, are afforded the same opportunities as students from more affluent and privileged districts,” said Richard Calkins, Superintendent of Alfred-Almond Central School District.

“A cohesive statewide virtual and online learning program will offer our most rural students an opportunity to capitalize on advancements throughout the state, gain critical experience with technology, and develop the skills necessary to compete in our 21st century world. It will create an even playing field for school districts that face geographic disparities,” said Senator Young.

“As a small, rural and geographically-isolated district, Pine Valley Central School is challenged to provide our students with an education that will enable them, upon graduation, to be accepted at the college of their choice and ultimately compete in our current and future economy,” said Mr. Morgante.

The legislation directs the Commissioner of Education, in conjunction with the New York State Broadband Program Office, NYSERDA and the Public Service Commission, to establish an Online Learning Advisory Committee and to make recommendations regarding the development and delivery of such services. The committee would be tasked with sharing their findings and recommendations with the Legislature and the Governor to be considered for inclusion in the 2014-2015 budget.

A statewide online and blended learning program would need to address a range of issues including, but not limited to, broadband access, funding, administrative barriers, and the identification of academic programming that is well-suited for delivery via online and electronic means.

“There is an urgent need for a statewide system of online and blended learning opportunities. I introduced this legislation via the Rural Resources Commission as the next step toward building innovative, systematic and statewide opportunities for online courses to help rural and geographically isolated schools across New York State. We must ensure that we are using technology and building the necessary systems to provide students with the access to the coursework they need to excel as the future leaders of New York State,” said Senator Young.

I applaud the Senator for her understanding of the needs of her constituents and for recognizing the tremendous positive impact that technology can, and will, play in education,” said Mr. Calkins.

The bill has been sent to the Assembly.