



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Promoting Virtual Learning in the Classroom

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*Legislation creates online learning advisory council to explore online and blended learning programs*

ALBANY – For many students in New York State, the classroom experience is being transformed through the development and implementation of virtual learning initiatives. While a number of schools are using these tools to provide students with access to unique courses and instruction, the lessons being learned along the way need to be applied statewide.

A bill passed in the Senate, (S.5509-C), and sponsored by Senator Catharine Young (R, I, C—Olean), Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, calls for the creation of a statewide online and blended learning program to address this issue.

Virtual learning programs include online courses as well as blended learning initiatives that combine both a physical location with online resources. They provide schools with cost-effective opportunities to use technology to offer students access to innovative coursework and educational resources otherwise not available.

“Virtual learning systems bring new and creative approaches to education. Technology can directly connect students with subject-matter experts from thousands of miles away.

Students will be able to take unique college preparatory or career-specific courses that were not previously available. Given that rural districts face a host of fiscal and geographic challenges, virtual learning initiatives open up a wealth of opportunities,” said Senator Young.

For example, there is the concept of the “flipped classroom.” It is a blended learning technique where the typical roles of lectures and homework are reversed. Before arriving in the classroom, students watch video lectures that were recorded by their teachers. The discussion and application of the lecture material takes place in the classroom, rather than as a traditional homework assignment.

Virtual learning also creates opportunities for school districts to provide students with access to courses, often through cooperation with other schools, that they would not be able to offer otherwise. For example, students may be able to take a wider range of advanced placement and other college preparatory classes.

“Leveraging technology correctly, both through the utilization of on-line coursework and by employing a ‘flipped classroom’ model, we will be providing our students with the tools necessary for them to be successful in today's global community,” said Mr. Richard Calkins, Superintendent of Alfred-Almond Central School District.

“This initiative is also vitally important to prepare students to succeed in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. Senator Young’s bill not only addresses school finance needs of underfunded, rural, low-wealth schools, but it also realizes that in order for our students to truly be college and career ready, they need access to learning experiences that take them beyond the traditional classroom brick and mortar experiences,” said Mr. Matthew Cole, Superintendent of Livonia Central School District.

Online and blended learning programs have been successfully developed 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.

The legislation directs the Commissioner of Education to establish an Online Learning Advisory Council and to make recommendations regarding the development and delivery of such services. The council would be tasked with sharing their findings and recommendations with the Legislature and the Governor to be considered for inclusion in the 2015-2016 budget.

A statewide online and blended learning program must 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.

The bill was also passed in the Assembly and will be sent to the Governor to be signed into law.

“This bill supports what many educators have known for years – technology is ubiquitous in all facets of our lives, except in far too many classrooms. It also confronts the fiscal realities facing our rural schools that have been limiting educators in these schools from transforming their classrooms and schools into technology-rich environments that our students need,” said Mr. Cole.

“I applaud Senator Young's efforts to bring equity and opportunity to our rural school districts. Technology plays a necessary and vital role in all aspects of our society, and this is particularly true in the field of education. Should this bill be signed into law, our students would be afforded the same opportunities to access a diverse and rich curriculum as their peers in more affluent school districts,” said Mr. Calkins.

“There is an urgent need for a statewide system of online and blended learning opportunities. We must ensure that we are using technology and building the necessary systems to enable students to capitalize on advancements throughout the state, gain critical experience with technology, and develop the skills necessary to compete in our 21st century world,” said Senator Young.