



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #538

Digital Learning Portal (DPI -- Administrative and Other Funding)

[LFB 2013-15 Budget Summary: Page 392, #7]

CURRENT LAW

No provision.

GOVERNOR

Provide \$1,450,000 GPR in 2014-15 and 1.19 GPR position in a new annual appropriation for a digital learning portal and larger "WISElearn" platform, including \$91,000 for salary and fringe benefits costs, and \$1,359,000 for supplies and services including hardware, software, and web hosting. Require the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to develop and maintain an online resource to: (a) provide educational resources for parents, teachers, and pupils; (b) offer online learning opportunities; (c) provide regional technical support centers; (d) provide professional development for teachers; and (e) enable video conferencing.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. According to the DPI agency budget request, the Department requested funding in order to implement a statewide online learning portal to facilitate blended learning environments for educators and pupils. The online "WISElearn" system would be accessed through single website, or digital portal, and would connect to a learning management system, curricular and professional development content repository, web-conferencing package, and collaboration space. The request would also provide funding for regional technical support centers.

2. Providing access to a single online resource can be a cost-effective way provide a wide variety of content to users statewide, primarily because the state can pay a single licensing fee, rather than forcing individual libraries or schools to each pay for a separate licenses, similar to the state's Badgerlink resource. While Wisconsin educators have access to such digital content, there is

currently no centralized, statewide system that gathers, organizes, and stores these materials once they are identified, for multiple disciplines, and accessible to a wide variety of users. DPI's proposal would develop a system to deliver training, best practices information, and professional development online, to provide a more cost-effective alternative to traveling to conferences for in-person training sessions. The agency request highlights the benefits of such an option for small and rural school districts, which may not have access to a network of mentors and peers within the district, sufficient budgets to bring in outside experts to conduct training, or staffing sufficient to allow educators to travel to training events or conferences during the school year.

3. The agency budget request indicates that some individual school districts currently provide access to online educational tools and training. However, efforts must be duplicated across districts and different programs make sharing content across districts difficult. In addition, districts have different levels of financial resources so that access to information technology, expertise, and online education tools can differ significantly.

4. Similarly, school districts are increasingly expected to provide high quality online learning opportunities to students. Students are expected to be familiar and comfortable with information technology prior to graduation, and digital curriculum can increase the variety of educational opportunities districts can afford to provide. A statewide online learning platform would help districts to develop a cost-effective virtual education program, without individually paying to develop content, purchase servers, and periodically update curriculum. The range of digital curriculum available could be expanded through a statewide system, providing greater access to all students.

5. On the other hand, online education for students is available through other means. Currently, Wisconsin school districts may provide selected supplemental online courses to their middle and high school curriculums using Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS), operated out of CESA 9. DPI has an agreement with WVS to provide online courses and services to districts statewide, for students who desire a blended or hybrid learning environment. In addition, Wisconsin school districts may operate virtual charter schools, enrolling both resident pupils and nonresident pupils through open enrollment. For the 2013-14 school year, 29 virtual charter schools are expected to be operating.

6. The digital learning portal would be the central website from which users would access the larger WISElearn system. The portal would provide access to the content repository, a learning management system, and collaborative on-line material. WISElearn would also include professional development and training to teach users about the portal. Finally, technical support would be available to school districts in need.

7. The content repository would be accessible to the public, and contain education-related materials on a variety of academic subjects, in formats including video, audio, documents, assessments, and a directory of websites. The repository would contain currently available material gathered from across the web, as well as original content created in-state. DPI indicates that currently, a wide variety of digital education materials are available online, but spread across many websites, based on different sets of academic standards, and curated by several state agencies, private organizations, or other agencies, including the Educational Communications Board (ECB),

BadgerLink, and many institutions of higher education. This portion of the portal would employ data management software to organize the material, allow users to search and retrieve relevant content quickly, and provide methods to store and modify the material they find.

8. The learning management system (LMS) would be accessible to both teachers and students in schools across the state. A learning management system is a software application for administering education courses or training programs over the Internet, including online or blended/hybrid courses with features for online collaboration. Typically an LMS would include infrastructure to deliver and manage instructional content, identify and assess learning or training goals, track the progress toward meeting those goals, and provide data for analyzing and reporting on the learning process. It can also be used make, use, or modify online learning modules, complete courses, or discrete online events, including by integrating material from the content repository.

9. Staff from DPI argue that making a single, large-scale system available statewide would cultivate a statewide learning community, encouraging collaboration among the state's educators and students. The collaborative portion of WISElearn would provide a forum for discussions between pupils and teachers, parents and teachers, or teacher to teacher and classroom to classroom. DPI's proposal would provide a tool for web-conferencing, to be used for online meetings, professional development sessions, webinars, or to bring guest speakers to classrooms over the web.

10. Finally, regional technical support centers, modeled on networks that have been developed in other states, would provide professional support to information technology staff within districts and schools. These support staff would work with schools to maximize their existing broadband, connection, and software capability, and help students access virtual courses. DPI indicates that it would base support centers in organizations receiving grants from the Department, such as CESAs.

11. Funding under the bill would total \$1,450,000 GPR in 2014-15, for first-year implementation costs of the WISElearn system. Itemized costs would include \$100,000 GPR for the digital learning portal, including the purchase of hardware and Badgerlink integration costs. DPI would re-assign 1.0 position for this purpose. Funding provided for the learning management system, including hosting and digital course content management costs, would be \$850,000. DPI would repurpose 1.81 current positions for the LMS, and requested an additional 0.19 GPR position to bring the total to 2.0 FTE dedicated to this portion of the project. Funding for the collaborative portion of the proposal would equal \$500,000 for software licensing costs and 1.0 GPR position.

12. It should be noted that DPI's agency request identified increased costs for the second year implementation of WISElearn. Costs for the acquisition and creation of curriculum content for the repository were an estimated \$500,000, and costs for technical support for the system were an estimated \$650,000. However, these costs would be offset somewhat by decreased costs related to the digital learning portal. The cost for the portal would decrease to \$10,000 per year for maintenance, after the initial \$100,000 hardware purchase. Therefore, the second year, ongoing costs for WISElearn would be an estimated \$2,510,000 GPR, which would be incurred in 2015-16, if the Governor's recommendation would be approved.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Approve the Governor's recommendation.
2. Delete provision.

ALT 2	Change to Bill	
	Funding	Positions
GPR	- \$1,450,000	- 1.19

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