'Virtual school' could be education's salvation

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When all is said and done, there are only three ways to reduce the cost of education: Reduce teachers' pay, reduce the number of students or increase class size. I suggest the first two are not viable options for a democratic society and our economic competitiveness. This leaves class size as the only real option for controlling cost.

Our school system uses an old and extremely inefficient way to deliver instruction, which is both costly and limited. As long as class size is capped, the cost of those classes is rigidly bound to the cost of the teachers of those classes.

In the general economy, businesses apply technology to their activities to increase productivity. This simply means that fewer people are able to do the same or more work. This allows for higher pay while keeping prices relatively low.

The Marion County Virtual School is a modern technology the school system could use to introduce efficiency into the system and thus increase productivity. Online instruction can be at least as good as, if not substantially better than, the average teacher standing in front of 25 students. A good online “class” can be good for all the students using it. A good teacher can be good for only the 25 students in the class.

There is no logical limitation on the number of students who can take an online class. If 50 students were in an online classroom, the teacher would be twice as productive as the teacher standing in front of a class of 25 students. Put another way, the same number of students could be instructed by half the number of teachers. But all academic classes, virtual or otherwise, are capped by the state constitution at the same student/teacher ratio as regular classes. This robs the technology of its great promise.

I do not know the optimal number of students a teacher associated with an online class could effectively handle. But almost all of the current grunt work of a teacher could be done effortlessly by program software. Instruction, testing, lesson planning and reporting can be prepared in a matter of seconds where now hours of effort is involved. The teacher could then “focus” on meaningful interaction with the student to add the human element to the learning experience.

Apart from reducing the direct cost of instruction per student, this technology could result in other savings. It would be much less dependent upon a bricks-and-mortar school. In its extreme, it could be designed so that no school building and, thus, no travel would be necessary. The number of students moving daily to and from a building could be significantly reduced. If it takes an hour each way, eliminating the commute saves the student two hours of wasted time each school day as well as
saving all the costs of the commute.

Is there no way to experiment with different ways to, in effect, create larger classrooms using the technology available while not violating the state constitution until the limitations on class size can be amended? Maybe online instruction via the Virtual School could be viewed as a form of home schooling? We must start thinking about ways to be more productive so that costs can be controlled, instead of obsessing each year about how the budget is going to be balanced when reducing the cost of instruction per student is never on the table.

It is time to address the issue of productivity and online instruction in a serious way, so the great promise of this technology can be realized to the benefit of students, taxpayers and teachers, alike. We should be willing to retain all teachers and allow them to share in the cost savings, which should evolve from teacher attrition over time.

As teachers leave the system, they should be replaced by increases in class size. Those remaining should gradually receive increases in pay from the cost savings. If we fail to make use of this technology to drive down the per-pupil cost of instruction, education will remain in a permanent financial crisis with students, teachers and taxpayers pitted against one another.

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