

Testimony to Senate Government Oversight Committee  
Feb. 23, 2012  
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Good morning. My name is Steve Pelzer and I am the superintendent of the CAM Community School District. I have been asked to share my views regarding online schools with you today. I'd like to take the opportunity to read an opening statement that will represent my views at this time. It is my responsibility, as a superintendent, to provide accurate information to Board members so they can make important well informed decisions. I share that goal today.

I have been in public education since 1977, serving 24 years as a secondary special education teacher. During my time in this position, it was quite evident that students had individual needs and learned in different ways. I entered the administrative field in 2002 and moved into the superintendent position in 2006. Our district has strived to be a leader in technology, innovation and student achievement. We currently are in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of a 1-1 laptop program for our 6-12 graders and in the first year of a 1-1 for grades 3-5. There are Promethean interactive whiteboards in every classroom in our district and we have implemented a 50 iPad program in our lower elementary grades. We are a Project Lead the Way school and recently introduced the VREP 3-dimensional virtual reality program to our high school students. Our Anita Elementary School was one of 304 schools nationwide to be honored as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education based on student achievement. We are proud of what we do and will continue to look for ways to increase opportunities for our students and staff.

There are many policy decisions that the Dept of Education, the legislature and Governor's office are going to discuss in moving forward to improve Iowa education. I'm not an attorney so I can't help you much with the legal issues. So much focus has been put on these topics of concern but very little has been mentioned regarding the benefits to students who do not fit into the traditional brick/mortar programs. I will be the first to agree that there is no replacement for the traditional classroom where students have face-to-face learning with peers and teachers. This is the foundation of our educational model and should always be for the vast majority of our students. I just hope we all don't forget the students who struggle in that environment.

My primary responsibility is to serve the students in the CAM District and provide them with a well-rounded program and as many opportunities as possible. The patrons of the CAM District are supportive of this partnership with Connections Academy and the CAM Board of Directors unanimously approved the agreement. Our CAM teachers have been kept informed of the progress on this endeavor and I have heard many positive comments and very few concerns. There was a great amount of study and research done in a relatively short period of time concerning our potential partner and this partnership prior to coming to an agreement to move forward. Administrators visited the Colorado Connections Academy and I can assure you that learning was taking place. We observed live lessons between teachers and groups of students. We observed a 1-1 tutoring session between a teacher and student in a math class. We observed an English teacher providing



immediate feedback on a poetry assignment. Teachers grade assessments and assignments, create interventions, monitor student performance and create and adapt lessons for individual students or groups of students. Students are in charge of their learning and teachers support and facilitate that learning, much the same as occurs in our more traditional classrooms. I urge you to visit one of the schools if you have the opportunity.

The partnership allows the CAM District to expand and enhance options for our students in areas we currently cannot afford to do. Our district will be able to offer electives that seem unthinkable for most small schools in future years. This was the driving force behind our Board's decision to pursue this partnership.

In addition to local benefits for students, I would hope that all educators have a concern that every student in the state has options that best fit his/her individual needs. Each student should have the right to a FAPE in a program that meets individual needs and family situations.

The development of the Iowa Connections Academy promotes economic development in our district and in the state. Teachers and administrators will be hired who live in our communities, work in our communities, spend their paychecks in our communities and pay Iowa taxes. Teachers who work for the Academy will be housed in a building within the CAM District, which lends to regular collaboration, communication and oversight. They will work with our teachers as we continue our 1:1 initiative and they have the potential to study content and delivery together. Education through the academy does not mean spending 6-8 hours per day in front of a computer. It goes well beyond that. Students are not working entirely on their own, but under supervision of a learning coach. Daily access will be required, but much time will be spent doing "regular" schoolwork using a curriculum that aligns with the Iowa and common core. Students have access to clubs such as Chess Clubs, Robotics Clubs, Literature Clubs, to name a few, that will allow them to network with students nationwide, increasing cultural opportunities.

At this moment we have open enrollment applications from less than .04%, of the public K-12 students in the state in the two academies combined (Clayton Ridge and CAM). I have heard statements from several parents on why they think this is an excellent option for their students and I'm sure each family has a story of its own. I believe these families and students deserve FAPE in a setting of their choice.

There is a need for alternative options for students who are failing the traditional system or whom the traditional system can't quite reach, including, but not limited, to these groups:

- Students with medical issues that cause significant absences or who cannot physically attend the brick and mortar buildings at all
- Dropouts, who now have a different option to finish high school and receive a diploma
- Students who suffer from harassment and bullying—these students are in every school district in the state. This option provides a safe and comfortable environment in which these students may flourish.



- Students who currently home-school---I find it difficult to believe that daily access/intervention with certified Iowa teachers can be anything but positive for home school families who choose this option.
- At-risk students who may or may not be attending an alternative school. With the highly qualified teacher requirement it has become increasingly difficult to provide a secondary alternative school program in a rural setting considering the cost of instructors. The alternative program our CAM students attend has gone to online classes to minimize instructor costs. I see this as an effective and cost efficient option for these students.
- Students who, for behavioral reasons, expulsion requirements or are on the sex offender registry, are not a fit for the traditional setting now will have an alternate option.
- Talented and gifted students who are three or four years ahead of their peers, but not socially ready for the challenges of high school or middle school can progress at their pace.
- Students in small districts like ours who deserve access to advanced content in an area that meets their passion.

In conclusion, I am excited about the possibilities that online learning can provide for students in Iowa. I am disappointed that this is the first opportunity I've had to visit with legislators regarding this option. The CAM Board, who will be the governing Board of the Academy, and our administration have been extremely transparent during this process and will continue to be in the future. Our Board wants to assure that every student benefits, and that accountability expectations are met...and we will work diligently toward this goal. I have talked to other school leaders and received positive comments and interest in learning more. I am concerned about providing the best education possible to real students who are preparing to enter today's modern world. In the end, we don't all have to share the same opinion, but our opinions should be formed based on all of the information about the issue. Differing opinions creates great conversation that can lead to positive outcomes. Thanks again for the opportunity to come before this committee and I look forward to your comments or questions.

