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Second Editorial From A Federal Perspective: An Effective Choice

In the United States, the role of developing education policy is left to the states due to the Tenth Amendment. However, the federal government does play a role in ensuring that students across the states are meeting key objectives. The U.S. Department of Education has developed many policies and initiatives to ensure that schools across the states are held to high standards. Cyber schools help the federal government’s efforts to make sure students are getting similar core educations by providing options. Revisions made to the regulations on cyber schools in Senate Bill 619, enrolled as Public Act 129 of 2012, will make cyber schools more prevalent in Michigan. These cyber schools will play an important role in achieving the goals of initiatives taken by the federal government to improve education such as the No Child Left Behind Act, The National Education Technology Plan, and the United States Department of Education’s Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2011-2014.

Senate Bill 619 will repeal the limits that were in place on the number of contracts that could be issued to cyber schools, and the cap on the number of students allowed to enroll in these cyber schools will increase in the next few years. Before this legislation was signed into law, cyber school students had to have been previously enrolled in a public school. This requirement has been deleted by SB619. Given that this is true, that implies the number of cyber schools will increase in Michigan and the number of choices open to students will expand. Then students who enroll in these schools will have access to innovative education that will help them reach national standards. Cyber schools increase the number of choices, competition between schools, the assessment of progress, achievement in math and sciences, and the accommodation of student needs.

Under the Bush Administration, the US Department of Education viewed cyber schools as an effective choice for parents and their students that provided for healthy competition. No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2001, which expanded the role of the federal government in education by standardizing educational performance across the states and encouraging competition between schools. During National Charter School Week in May of 2004, US Secretary of Education Rod Paige said, "The more choices parents have, the better they will be able to pick the right environment for their child. Empowered with options and information, parents can help their children achieve and succeed" (Thomas). Online learning is included as one of these options, and the competition between public schools and cyber schools pushes both to excel.

Not only do cyber schools encourage competition, online learning programs provide a better way of assessing student’s progress. NCLB requires annual testing, annual academic progress, report cards, teacher qualifications, and funding changes. Cyber schools go above and beyond just assessing students on an annual basis. “An online system can collect much more and much more detailed information about how students are learning than manual methods” (*Assessment*). By collecting data and monitoring student progress from the beginning, online schools can adjust the curriculum throughout, so students can accelerate through mastered skills and spend extra time on skills that need more attention.

Cyber schools could also be a viable option in achieving the goals of The National Education Technology Plan that was developed by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010. The plan draws guidance from the report of the National Science Foundation Task Force on Cyberlearning, and it shows how cyber schools could increase achievement in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (*Executive*). One objective of the plan is to increase productivity by redesigning and transforming our education system by taking advantage of technology. Variance among individual students, such as different styles and paces of learning, provides the demand for a supply of cyber schools (*Productivity*). Senate Bill 619 will provide more options for students who need a different style of learning to succeed. The amount of time spent in a classroom used to be the measure of educational attainment, but online schools break this mold. An education that is more flexible and adjusts with a student’s progress provides for more productivity as can be seen in the Westwood Cyber School example in Detroit, MI. (*Productivity*). This cyber school did not have traditional classrooms, academic departments, courses, or tests, but it appealed to the wants and needs of students and increased enrollment by 33 percent in an area plagued by dropouts.

Senate Bill 619 increases options for students by providing more cyber schools to students. The US Department of Education Strategic Plan pushes for using data and improving STEM education, which cyber schools help to do (Duncan). Since No Child Left Behind, the federal government has supported innovative technologies that measure progress, provide choices, and promote healthy competition between schools.

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