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November 22, 2010

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Matinga Ragatz

Subject: Michigan Teacher of the Year, September Report

Earlier this month I spoke at the annual Virtual School Symposium (VSS) in Phoenix, Arizona. Since 2003, this symposium has highlighted the cutting-edge work in K-12 online education across the country. It is the only national conference focused solely on K-12 online learning and virtual schools in a comprehensive way. It is attended by practitioners and policymakers seeking to develop e-learning programs within educational institutions in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and many other countries. This year approximately 2,000 representatives attended this event. There were opportunities to network and learn about the latest trends, challenges, and opportunities in e-learning. Participants also gained access to the latest research and best practices.

The conference is organized by iNACOL (International Association of K-12 Online Learning). iNACOL is a non-profit 501(c)(3) membership association based in the Washington, D.C. area with over 3,700 members. Its members represent a diverse cross-section of K-12 education from school districts, charter schools, state education agencies, non-profit organizations, research institutions, corporate entities, and other content and technology providers.

Along with speaking at the symposium, I went to VSS to find new and exciting online content for my World History hybrid course. I left the conference with much, much more.

I attended workshops presented by people experienced in hybrid education. I met administrators, technology directors and teachers who were nervously hoping for magic nuggets to help them begin a hybrid program in their schools. Some individuals were there because they felt their institutions needed to stay relevant and competitive by adding a hybrid program. Some were there to create off-campus credit recovery and course flexibility options. Some were there to learn how hybrid programs can lessen the current budget cuts and stresses. Everyone was worried and quite stressed because there is no one definition of a hybrid classroom.

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Since this was also a networking event, I had hoped to connect with some of the current headlining online course content players in the field and somehow convince them to allow me, the average school teacher, to, at the very least, pilot their online programs in a successful blended classroom. I eagerly went to the ubiquitous tech conference exhibit hall looking for the big names in the online curriculum industry.

It was a tremendous experience and I saw some amazing tools and resources. However, I left the exhibit hall disappointed because it turns out that the major online curriculum sources are still operating like book publishing companies. None showed interest in providing educational resources to a single teacher. To them, it is not profitable to customize in a small scale and/or deal with the needs of individual teachers. It is one thing to read about how big business works, but quite another humbling experience to see these practices face-to-face.

Luckily for me, and for teachers worldwide, the open source course market gets bigger and better every year. Thanks to people who have made a commitment to create great educational content and share it for free, teachers from all demographics can continue to enhance student online learning. From the former Governor of West Virginia, Bob Wise, I learned in his keynote speech that because of the declining state fiscal revenues, the mounting teacher shortage and the increase in global demand for skilled workers, online/hybrid supplemental programs are seriously being considered as a possible cost saving measure nationwide. From the Deputy Secretary of Innovation and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education, I learned about the costly realities in federal education funding that will occur if we continue to obstruct innovations in American schools today.

The best part of attending a conference is the amazing networking opportunities. I met many teachers, administrators, and developers anxious to understand the scope of online education in the United States today. The reality seems to be that there is no single magic way to learn online. There is not a single formula or approach, so many of us are scrambling to find or create a viable method of online learning.

As more teachers and institutions adopt or create their own online learning models, I sincerely hope that they remember to prepare a fertile foundation for their online programs. It is important that they do not simply layer their face-to-face curriculum with Internet resources. It is vital that they really consider laying a new foundation to house their online learning systems. A new foundation means a new way of thinking. The online learning environment is very customizable but it is also very easy to get it wrong.

This is all very exciting because for years I have watched the car industry, the computer industry, and even the food industry go through tremendous innovations. However, schools have changed very little, until now. I look forward to my continuing role with hybrid and online learning as a Global Studies teacher in the Grand Ledge Schools.