

HB 4 Distance Learning Pilot Project

Sponsor Testimony

Representative Debbie Phillips

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Good afternoon Chairman Williams, Ranking member Stebelton and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer sponsor testimony today on the creation of an interactive distance learning pilot project.

This project is an opportunity to add value to the educational opportunities available to Ohio K-12 students. It's an opportunity to use technology to offer a wider curriculum and address some of the disparities in educational opportunity in our current system. Representative Garrison and I view this project as complementary to, and an enhancement of the education reforms proposed in the executive budget.

Currently, Ohio has extensive technical infrastructure in place (possibly the best), widespread use of online learning, primarily through online charter schools, a variety of consortia-style distance learning programs, and the Ohio Distance Learning Network.

Ohio's technology infrastructure is great and will not be the barrier to increasing use of these tools. Available bandwidth has grown rapidly, Internet2 is widely available, and education partners at all levels are supportive. All Ohio school buildings are connected, with the majority having better than a 1.5 mbps connection (although 28% have T-1 or less). All have the option of upgrading, and there is abundant fiber capacity, available without additional cost to schools. T-1 lines (1.5 mbps) are insufficient for I-TV and expanding the band width will be a part of any universal distance learning initiative we pursue.

The nature of the pilot program will be in the number of courses offered, not in the availability of the courses in particular locations. Our intention is to make these courses available statewide. While some states offer a wide range of distance learning opportunities, the scope of offering 3 courses will make this a manageable project, with the option of expanding offerings in the future. In addition, there are great possibilities for collaboration among and between students in different districts, and in the area of professional development opportunities.

There are many uses of technology for distance learning. For this project, we are specifically piloting the use of interactive digital teleconferencing. This technology offers an important improvement over other technologies, in that it allows synchronous, real-time interactions between the teacher and the students.

The teachers will be housed at E-tech, and will be highly-qualified public school teachers. Students will be able to take these courses at their local high school, creating additional course opportunities across the state with great efficiency. This is one solution to the need to offer high quality educational opportunities to Ohio students, and one that will help them develop 21st century networking skills at the same time.