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Senate of

Maine

Senate District 28

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Testimony from
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in support of

LD 1736, "Resolve, To Create a State-run Virtual Academy Providing More Students with Access to Online Learning Through Their Existing School Districts"

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

February 4, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Millett, Representative MacDonald and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Brian Langley and I represent Senate District 28, which is comprised of 23 coastal towns in Hancock County and Isle au Haut in Knox County. It is a pleasure to be here with you today to present LD 1736, "Resolve, To Create a State-run Virtual Academy Providing More Students with Access to Online Learning Through Their Existing School Districts."

I want to start today with a story about Dr. Sebastian Thrun[1] of Stanford, who decided that he wasn't doing enough to educate his students. This professor was regarded as a star, regularly packing 200 students into lecture halls. So in 2011 he started teaching in front of his digital camera recording his lectures, posting his homework assignments and exams to the masses, just as he did for his Stanford students, all for free. Dr. Thrun is considered the Godfather of free online education who launched the movement to put Ivy League course work online for free as a way to offer quality education to the masses. We now know this today as MOOC, Massive Open Online Content. What I found most troubling is that the man who started this revolution no longer believes the hype.

What he found out less than two years into the project, and with more than 1.6 million students tuning in online, is that less than 10 percent of them were completing the courses. This data point was very discouraging to him despite employing state-of-the-art technology and sophisticated pedagogical strategies to keep users engaged, peppering students with quizzes and gamifying their education with progress meters and badges.

What was missing? In my opinion, people – the teacher and fellow students, what we think of as the "learning environment." I think this is especially true for students of a younger age.

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[1] http://www.fastcompany.com/3021473/udacity-sebastian-thrun-uphill-climb

That story illustrates for me my biggest concern about online virtual charter schools. To be clear: I support charter schools and voted for the legislation that allows them in Maine. My master's degree work is in Online Education. I am a strident supporter of online education. Where I have concern is with a completely virtual school that statistically is proven to meet the needs of one percent of the student population. Going back to Professor Thrun's data of completion rates, I ask can we do a better job of constructing a learning environment that combines the best of both worlds; one that creates an opportunity for all Maine students to have access to rich, rigorous and relevant content at an affordable price; one that capitalizes on the human need to be part of something, part of a group, to connect with an adult who cares. We all know that a learning environment – a teacher and fellow students – is critical to helping students achieve.

I believe virtual learning has a significant and crucial role in education, particularly in a rural state like Maine, where not all schools have the resources to offer a full curriculum that challenges students. Online courses also would be a help to Career and Technical students trying to juggle CTE classes and their core subjects.

The solution to me is to look at opportunities to provide online classes to students attending traditional brick and mortar schools so they can have the best of both worlds, a learning environment with excellent teachers and fellow students while taking advantage of the vast array of virtual class offerings. I even envision a 100 percent virtual student attending a bricks and mortar school to avoid isolation and to participate in extra-curricular activities.

When I envision a learning environment for online classes I picture a space, maybe in the school library, where students gather to work on their laptops, but have support from each other and school staff – the librarians and teachers in the school certified in the course work the students are taking online.

That's why I sponsored this bill to create a virtual resource for all Maine school districts to allow them to offer online classes in what is called a "blended learning" environment. This virtual academy would take advantage of the technology we've already paid for in schools – laptops in the middle schools and high schools and Tandberg two-way video connections available in most districts.

Offering content through a state-run academy would do a number of important things. It would allow us to assure the quality of the content, and because it would be offered by a state-run non-profit, it would keep the prices affordable for schools. Simply stated I believe we can get more for our dollar and have better oversight of our most precious citizens, our children.

How would this state-run academy look?

That would be up to a group of stakeholders to help shape, but one model I like a lot is the New Hampshire Virtual Learning Academy. I know the Maine Charter Commission, which has done a tremendous job reviewing applicants for charter schools in Maine, has visited that academy and believes it has promise.

I believe we need to learn from New Hampshire, and perhaps even partner with them initially, to get more quality online courses into our schools and make the Maine Virtual Academy a reality sooner not later. New Hampshire has expressed interest in working with Maine and that I believe is very good news since it is important not to waste our time reinventing the wheel.

That partnering would be one of two parallel tracks we would follow to bring the Maine Virtual Academy into existence. While working with our partners in New Hampshire, we would be developing the architecture for our own system, or if partnering with New Hampshire makes better sense, we could continue on that route.

The stakeholder group charged with helping plan the Maine Virtual Academy would include school administrators and teachers and others vested in online learning, including technology experts already in our schools and from around the state.

They would be on a timeline. Within six months they would have to have put forward a viable plan for the creation of the academy that includes identifying necessary funding; working with school districts to make sure a learning space is created for virtual coursework; and have an implementation plan for taking the academy live. For me to support this initiative, there has to be hard and fast deadlines.

If those requirements are not met within six months, the moratorium proposed in this legislation on the approval of virtual charter schools would be lifted. If they do meet those requirements, the moratorium would continue for another six months to allow the academy to get up and running.

In conclusion, Professor Thrun did not give up. He created a company called Udacity[2] where you can still take online courses for free by yourself......not much changed there. However for a fee, you are assigned a personal coach who provides feedback, helps students create and stay on track with a personalized course timeline and for those times when immediate help is needed, provides daily instant access to a pool of coaches via chat. He added the human element. I believe we too can create a success story.

Thank you for your patience today and indulging my lengthy testimony. I will answer any questions you might have.

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[2] https://www.udacity.com/