The future of K-12 education

The future of K-12 education, Part 2: access and awareness

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Curt Bonk, professor of Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University, is a former CPA with master’s and Ph.D. degrees in educational psychology and is the author of many books about emerging technologies for learning. (Courtesy photo)

EDITORS NOTE: This story is the second in a Herald-Times series on the future of K-12 education.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic caused all school buildings in the state to close, many school districts transitioned to e-learning. They did so without time to adequately prepare, and while students may have devices provided by schools, the issue of access to reliable internet access remains for many — particularly students.

Curt Bonk, a professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University, predicts that going forward, the state
will provide more money for devices and internet accessibility.

Bonk is a former CPA, has his master’s and Ph.D. degrees in educational psychology and has authored a number of books about emerging technologies for learning.

“They will not want kids to be in the same predicament they’ve been in today, to come home and not have access to the internet,” Bonk said.

Monroe County’s public school districts, the Monroe County Community School Corp. and Richland-Bean Blossom Community School Corp., are one-to-one, meaning there is one electronic device for every one student. These districts are using a combination of e-learning and physical learning packets. While there are hotspots located around Monroe County and at schools, some students don’t have a way to get to them.

In rural communities, Bonk said going forward there’s going to have to be some form of internet stations that have broadband, and that’s going to have to be federal and state level in nature.

Gov. Eric Holcomb has a $100 million initiative to improve broadband access in rural areas of the state, and grants started being awarded last year. The Next Level Connections Broadband Grant Program has grant applications open now, with the deadline extended because of COVID-19.

“There will be more empathy for the students out there. The state department and all educators will become more empathetic to the needs of the teachers and students because they don’t want to be embarrassed again by having kids go home in districts where they haven’t provided the resources,” Bonk said.

In a livestreamed address to media on April 21, Jennifer McCormick, state superintendent of public instruction, said in her opinion, internet access is a statewide issue, not a school issue. Yet schools are feeling the impact of the issue.

“That’s our infrastructure that we should be putting significant dollars behind,” she said. “And I know from the feds some of those opportunities are coming, but it is a challenge as a state.”

Bonk said organizations are already working on ways to provide broadband access at a low cost, and these kinds of initiatives are global, not just in the United States.

According to American Community Survey data from 2018, 77.6% of households in the state have a broadband internet subscription. In Monroe County, 82.8% do.

Locally, school districts are receiving funding from The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act — or CARES Act.
This school year, MCCSC is operating on a budget of around $135 million and R-BB on a budget of around $28 million. MCCSC is receiving $1,942,572.66 from the CARES Act and R-BB is receiving $250,032.54, according to the Indiana Department of Education. The funds are able to be spent in various ways, including WiFi/internet connectivity and professional development on e-learning.

Bonk pointed out another possible way to make content available to K-12 students. Schools could provide a memory stick or terabyte data stick to every student, so all the course content could be available for them at the start of the semester. This could help students who are provided a device by a school district but don’t have internet access or a strong connection at home.

“Then they won’t have to worry about the internet access at any point in time, except when it relates to current news or current events or updates,” Bonk said.

With the e-learning period during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bonk thinks there will be more awareness about how people have been experimenting with online learning, which has been taking place for decades.

Bonk taught the second fully online class in the IU School of Education and is likely one of the first to do blended learning — a combination of online and face-to-face instruction — in 1993. Students and teachers forming communities online isn’t new, Bonk said.

“But people have not totally been aware of it, and this coronavirus is going to take those experiments and make others aware that weren’t aware or had been resistant, because teachers are overwhelmed with just keeping up all the time,” he said.

In March, standardized tests in Indiana were canceled in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With a break from standardized testing, teachers have gotten to experiment, and we’ll see the results of that soon, Bonk said.

“Technology is subtle,” Bonk said. “It gets change in through the back door.”

He said a lot of progressive education has happened through project-based and problem-based learning, to name a few, and more innovative education is going to happen as a result of more technology access and more training.

“There’s a number of things that will springboard from this, not immediately, but change will happen,” Bonk said.

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