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Schools must learn to use Internet to quickly recover from disaster

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Monday, December 4, 2006

By **KENNETH E. HARTMAN**
For the Courier-Post



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Educational and governmental leaders met recently in Washington to discuss, once again, how we can keep our schools safe and prevent tragic events such as the Amish schoolhouse murders from occurring in our communities.

Predictably, and like those discussions after the Columbine tragedy, there were calls for increased funding for school security, counseling services for at-risk children and community-school partnerships.

Rapid response

While these resources may be warranted, the bigger question no one addressed at this meeting was what federal, state and local contingency plans are in place to respond to a much larger and unprecedented attack on our nation's schools and colleges. Imagine what would happen if a terrorist organization and or pandemic outbreak disrupted an entire county or city school district, forcing schools and area college campuses to close indefinitely? Where would the teachers and professor go to teach and where would the students go to learn?

The federal government has already designed, developed and paid for the solution to this potential and enormous national security threat: It's called the Internet. While created for the Pentagon nearly 30 years ago to help its military leaders maintain communications with each other in the event of a Soviet attack, this same network has the ability to enable teachers to facilitate learning outside classrooms.

That's the good news. The bad news is that less than 1 percent of K-12 teachers have ever taught online or received any training on how to teach online, and most universities and colleges teach less than 5 percent of their courses online.

While other sectors of our economy (financial and health care) have redundancy plans and systems in place, our educational systems have failed to develop alternative procedures to assure continuity of instruction in the event of a prolonged school closure.

When Hurricane Katrina destroyed thousands of school and college classrooms and left nearly 300,000 students "school-less," the solution was to relocate interested families to other school districts around the country. College students were told to take courses at other college campuses. No plans or procedures were in place to take teaching online to continue learning in a virtual classroom environment.

The development of a continuity of operations plan is a local, state and national security issue and, therefore, must be addressed at all the levels in the following manner:

The United States Departments of Education and Department of Homeland Security must take the lead in developing and distributing guidelines to schools and colleges on implementing a model distance learning program.

The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, under the United States Department of Education, must update its manual, (Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities), written in May 2003, to include distance learning.

National educational associations representing teacher preparation programs and teachers' organizations must come together to discuss the critical shortage of teachers and professors proficient in online learning. They should agree that all teachers receive in-service training and take courses on distance learning, and be required to teach a course partially and/or fully online.

Mandate training

States should require all teachers to take at least one graduate-level course in online instruction as a condition of earning or maintaining a license.

Superintendents and college presidents must assess the readiness of their faculty to teach online, prioritize curriculum (not every course can be developed and taught online at once), determine their institution's technical ability to host an online learning management system and measure the level of access that all their students have to

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the technology needed (Internet, computer, software, etc.) to participate in an online course and learning environment.

School board members and college trustees have a fiduciary responsibility to ensure that their institutions have comprehensive plans for online learning. They must set reasonable goals for course and faculty development, and ensure their constituents (faculty, students, parents and administrators) that, in the event of a prolonged crisis, the business of educating students will continue, albeit in a different environment.

Schools should require all textbook publishers to offer an online version of every textbook purchased, as well as provide faculty with online learning and assessment modules needed to support the textbook.

Secondary school parents must be actively involved in all phases of online learning. After all, their kitchens, basements and family rooms will be our new classrooms.

As educators, we have a responsibility and duty to help our nation prepare and plan for a day we pray never occurs. As parents, citizens, school tax and college tuition payers, we have the right to demand that our education and governmental leaders recognize and learn the "other" lesson from recent events. As a nation, it's time to stop living in denial of the threats we now face and to plan for a day when the school bell may not ring.

The writer is the director of academic affairs at Drexel University Online and is a Cherry Hill resident.

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June 3, 2007

Education

What's happening in schools across your area? Find out

Internet and education: What will the future bring?

By Rusty Pray
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Ken Hartman was talking about his favorite subject: technology and its impact on education.

"It's truly exciting in online learning right now, because it's where the growth is occurring in education," said Hartman, a Cherry Hill resident and the director of academic affairs at Drexel University's eLearning, an online education subsidiary.

Hartman looks ahead — well, actually, it's happening now on a trial basis — and sees the Internet on school buses.

"Soon, students will have the ability to communicate with their teachers on the way to school and on the way home," he said.

That might not be good news to the school-bus chatters.

"It will make the ride quieter, that's for sure," Hartman said, laughing.

Hartman has been involved in technology and distance learning — he teaches a master's degree education class online every other term — for a long time.

"I always had an interest in technology," he said. "Early on, I realized that technology had a chance to have an impact on how kids learn, and more importantly, how they communicate with their teachers."

In 1997, long before YouTube and MySpace, he created an Internet-based education show called "After School."

"It was a series of 55-second segments of tips for parents on how to help their kids become better learners," he said.

Hartman lectures, writes and makes television appearances to talk about technology, the Internet and their use in education.

He believes the Internet could be used by schools as a security tool.

"Suppose a terrorist organization or epidemic disrupted an entire county or city school district, forcing schools and area colleges to close indefinitely?" he said. "Where would the teachers and professors go to teach, and where would the students go to learn?"

Hartman, who was recently

honored as educator of the year by the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education — his alma mater — also believes teachers are woefully undertrained in how to use the Internet in their jobs.

He said that less than 1 percent of teachers in kindergarten through 12th grade have taught online or been trained in how to teach online.

"The problem is, when it comes to education, teachers' training programs have not kept up with the technology," Hartman said. "If the teachers don't get it, neither will students."

He said the training should come on the college undergraduate level.

"There's a critical need for training, and training in college," he said. "Otherwise, school districts will spend tens of thousands of dollars on staff training when that proficiency should have been demonstrated prior to graduation."

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6/3/2007