

Testimony offered on behalf of:
JANE C. ST. PIERRE

IN SUPPORT OF:
SB0941 – Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Schools – Alterations

Senate Education, Health & Economic Affairs Committee
Hearing: 3/18/2012 at 1:00 PM

Good morning Mister Chairman and Honorable members of the Education, Health & Economic Affairs Committee. I am here to provide written testimony in **FAVOR of SB0941 - Primary and Secondary Education – Virtual Schools – Alterations.**

My name is Jane St. Pierre. I am a certified teacher (grades pre-k through 8th) in the State of Louisiana with 23 years of teaching experience in both public and private schools. My advocacy for online education, despite my career in brick-and-mortar settings, is the result of my son's difficult journey to the acquisition of a high school diploma.

My son was diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and OCD. School was a struggle. Staying seated and on task were problematic from an ADHD perspective. OCD complicated matters by offering further focusing distractions. Medication certainly helped, but the most effective ones that helped him concentrate caused exhausting tics. So, we chose a medication that gave some relief, but his ability to focus was still compromised. Dyslexia and dysgraphia made note taking and test taking areas of anxiety.

He navigated through the lower grades well. He would put in many extra hours at the kitchen table every night with homework and studying for tests. He would begin studying for a test as soon as the units were introduced, adding new study cards each night. "Cramming," which worked for many of his schoolmates, was completely ineffective for him. In total, he would likely average 5-6 hours of studying for each test (and this was at the elementary grade level), over several weeks. This preparation resulted in unpredictable test scores – sometimes A's, but more often much lower. He often verbalized frustration over the fact that everyone else seemed to work less than he did yet outperform him. The two private schools in which he was enrolled in high school refused to grant the accommodations promised at enrollment. As his parent and educational champion, I became incredibly frustrated. Communicating with the school, begging for accommodations and support, fighting for him when he was disciplined for side effects such as falling asleep in class (because of increased anxiety medication which was reported to the school), and forfeiting practically all family quality time trying to keep him academically afloat had me weary and nearing hopeless. By the beginning of 10th grade, my son begged me to let him drop out of school. It was a spirit-crushing request.

I am so grateful to his psychiatrist who advised during a phone call placed in the evening that perhaps a radical change would be helpful rather than increased medication. It was obvious that my son's total being was compromised in a traditional school setting. **The cure – I enrolled him in a private online school based out of Maryland (then known as International Connections Academy and presently named Pearson Online Academy). Our lives changed.** He could copy lesson notes rather than trying to handwrite them, listen to lectures/ video presentations as many times as needed, schedule online private tutoring sessions with his teachers, take breaks during lessons and give his body the movement it required, and even have morning/ early afternoon employment and complete his lessons afterwards. The built-in calendar and scheduling components of the program allowed him to do schoolwork at his own pace (seven days each week) and thereby get ahead so that he could continue playing his trombone in a band and go fishing. His medications were reduced, and he readily says that he learned more in 3 years of online school than he did the entire time he attended brick and mortar schools.

So, what worked in the online setting?

1. Certified educators taught each class.
2. All digital textbooks were available to him. Other licenses were also extended when needed such as access to digital biology laboratories for experiments and a digital graphing calculator for use in math classes. Each semester, the school provided all necessities online. Gone were the days of not having the needed materials to be successful.
3. In addition to textbooks, there were countless resources embedded in every lesson. For example, links to Khan Academy explanations, Discovery video clips, Teachlet Tutorials, and other resources such as links to encyclopedias and other types of literature are available to support the topic being learned and stretch his understanding. These added resources served as remediation and enrichment for him. As a teacher, I know for sure that it would have taken hours of my time to assemble the collection of supporting resources provided in each lesson.
4. The possibility of class offerings was tremendous. Never did he request a class that was made unavailable due to lack of enrollment or a certified teacher. The school secured a section/ teacher somewhere in the nation to make his enrollment possible.
5. Pearson/ Connections Academy has a team of tech specialists available to receive calls if any technology glitches are experienced. Honestly, most of the problems that occurred for us were user-caused! However, they were promptly and respectfully fixed – every single time.
6. The school had a complete staff – principal, guidance counselors, and teachers – who promptly responded to every email or call placed (within 24 hours, usually sooner). All members of the staff were able to assess my son's progress with the incredible educational tracking system in place. They had information regarding grades, attendance, lesson progress, etc. at their fingertips within seconds.
7. Live Lessons were held in each subject. Students could choose whether to enable video of themselves, microphone, or participation via typing responses in a conversation sidebar. Students interacted with the teachers and other students during these lessons. There was also an option of attending a recording of the Live Lessons (and submitting a small assignment proving attendance) if students had a scheduling conflict.
8. Students interacted in Discussions which were embedded in some lessons. In such activities, a topic was presented by the teachers and students took a stance on an issue, posted it, and included reasoning behind their views. Students were then required to respond to at least two classmates – either in agreement or disagreement – with further supporting details. These conversations were moderated by the teachers who offered instruction regarding online etiquette and components in a respectful exchange. (As a side note, his online school experience was 100% bully-free!)
9. Assessments were delivered in the form of lesson checks (a few questions at the end of each lesson to measure a student's understanding), quizzes, tests, portfolios, experiments, and essays. Teachers placed telephone calls to students in every subject to make a connection and evaluate progress. All learning styles were wonderfully valued and employed.
10. Any student requiring additional assistance could sign up for private online sessions with teachers. Live Tutors are always available.
11. Interaction with other students and teachers was facilitated. There was a multitude of club's students could join – even during the summer – that were sponsored and moderated by the school. The teachers

knew my son! (The 12th grade English teacher learned that my son played trombone in a rock band and played his music as students were assembling for her Live Lessons. She even volunteered to drive from Texas to watch his performance at the New Orleans Jazz Fest. The biology teacher who resided in Hawaii quickly gathered my son was an avid fisherman and geared a telephone conversation to include a comparison between fishing in the Gulf of Mexico vs. the Pacific Ocean – all while skillfully bringing tides and other lesson topics into the conversation.)

12. Another wonderful aspect of our online school was the master calendar (for every day of the school year from the first day to the last day) viewable by both students and parents/learning coaches. Gone were the days of trying to find papers in a book bag or calling others for reminders about assignments and deadlines. (This is a critical accommodation for students diagnosed with ADD/ADHD.) Daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly assignments, assessments, etc. could be viewed with the click of a finger. Seeing that a cumbersome essay was due in two weeks allowed for a break down in the tasks - doing a little each day - until the deadline (same with large tests and portfolios). Having access to this academic year calendar taught organization as opposed to being the “crutch” many school administrators/ teachers believed it to be. We cherished knowing exactly where accurate information could always be found about academic responsibilities - and it was available 24/7. This beautifully allowed him to plan for evenings when other responsibilities (such as work, extracurricular activities, family obligations, etc.) arose - perhaps submitting lessons on the weekend to clear out school obligations on a weekday.

From flashback to present, my son is now 23 years old. He is well-respected by his employer, Sherwin Williams, for his tremendous work ethic, loyalty, and dependability. He is the type of guy who shows up early to work every day, volunteers to stay late, and makes himself available to be of service when the store is in a crunch. He has the distinction of being the youngest individual promoted to the position of store manager in his district. As I always knew, he is intelligent, well-spoken, and knowledgeable about most topics that come up in discussion. His experience in the online school taught him tremendous efficiency in researching topics effectively for a dyslexic person rather than skimming textbooks. He learned how to evaluate online sources and be selective about the information being utilized. We give a tremendous amount of credit to his online high school for making a successful career a possibility for him. He is a success rather than a high school drop-out statistic.

I am deeply passionate about expanding educational opportunities for students everywhere because of our path. Is online school the best alternative for all students? Absolutely not. Is a brick-and-mortar traditional program the best alternative for all students? Absolutely not. It is the absolute obligation of every school system to serve communities with options as varied as students’ learning differences. To fail to do so condemns a portion of the population to guaranteed defeat. We all must strive for better - for ALL students.

It is for these reasons that I petition the Committee for a **FAVORABLE Report on SB0941**.

Sincerely,

Jane C. St. Pierre
21173 Greenwell Springs Road
Greenwell Springs, LA 70739
(225) 954-6823
janecstpierre@gmail.com