

From the Superintendent of Schools...

Conrad High School offers its students solid classroom preparation in the basics, a proven and recognized art and music program that includes dedicated community support, a long-time business teacher, and a very good system for technical education. CHS has also adopted a program, in its infancy, to provide our students with online learning opportunities through the Montana Digital Academy (MTDA).

In order to strengthen our online learning program, I am working with our District's Online Learning Coordinator (Karen Lee) and CHS Principal (Ken Larson) to establish a specific, dedicated classroom space for our high school students to take the online learning programs that are already available at CHS – dual credit college courses, original credit courses, elective courses, and Career and Technology Education (CTE) courses available through MTDA.

The fact is that Conrad High School has been on the leading edge in being able to offer online learning opportunities for a few years. About three or four years ago, the Montana Legislature developed and funded the Montana Digital Academy (MTDA) which provides a gateway for our high school students to access a wide variety of academic and vocationally oriented courses that can be accessed online. They also changed some of the rules that allowed our students to access dual credit college courses through the Montana University System.

Both of these online course delivery systems offer our students the opportunity to access a multitude of high interest, college and career oriented classes that many high schools (especially small, rural districts) are not able to offer. Because they are available online, these courses are available for all students, in any high school, big or small. From Libby to Miles City

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and from West Yellowstone to Burlington, any school with a computer lab (or even just a few computers) and internet access can offer their students the opportunities to access and complete any career or college course available online.

Part of the plan that I presented at a recent School Board Work Session is designed to bolster the Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses – already available online through MTDA – by adding a new instructional program called Odysseyware.

One of the most effective online learning systems available in America today, are the instructional and academic resources found in the Odysseyware online learning system.

Odysseyware can provide our students with the opportunities to explore more than 70 Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses – engineering and design, food and beverage management, fire and emergency services, fundamentals of digital media, natural resources management, introduction to law, public safety, corrections, and security, with many others to choose from and many more to be added – that Conrad High School is not able to offer through live classroom instruction, or through MTDA.

Odysseyware also provides extensive and dynamic instructional and academic resources that our teachers (throughout the District) can use in their regular classroom instruction. The instructional resources made available through the Odysseyware instructional system are completely customizable for use by any teacher, in grades 3-12, who chooses to use them, in any classroom, and allows teachers to add interest and interaction to their already outstanding instructional delivery.

Odysseyware online courses can also make available additional remedial education options, credit recovery options, alternative school academic resources, and remote learning

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resources (for students who may have long-term medical conditions that preclude them from attending school, or be out of school for long periods for some other reason).

All of these additions will help to ensure that our students can compete with any student in the state, academically, and that they have as many instructional and academic options and opportunities as any student in the country. The students of Conrad Public Schools should not be limited in any way because they were educated in a small, rural, Montana school district.

Under the program that I have proposed, there are no curricular or extra-curricular program cuts, no teachers will be fired, there is no impact on our ability to raise our teacher's salaries, students will continue to be able to take the courses they are interested in (they will also have a lot more courses to choose from), and the only real change that will be made is that CHS will have a dedicated classroom (CHS Online Learning Academy – COLA) where they can take their online courses whether they are dual credit college courses, MTDA courses, or CTE courses provided by Odysseyware. The COLA will be staffed by a certified teacher who can provide structure, direction, and student support to better help to ensure student success.

Online learning is for all of our students. It has become the training standard throughout every work-place in the U.S., and the world. It is imperative that all of our students graduate with the skills and abilities to navigate within the world of online learning.

Online learning is everywhere – every major corporation around the world provides online courses to employees at every level of their operations. Just about every industry has adopted online learning in order to provide training to their employees – it's flexible, inexpensive, and can be targeted to specific job requirements. Locally, those looking to update their medical knowledge, coaching certification, fire certification, or insurance license are likely

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required to use online courses to do so.

Students in Conrad Public Schools currently have the opportunity to take a multitude of online coursework, whether it is for dual credit college courses, Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses, or remedial and credit recovery courses. Given our current high school graduation requirements, our students have the opportunity to take up to 15 elective courses. That means that our ambitious, college-bound students could graduate from Conrad High School with up to 45 college credit hours. That is basically one and a half years of college credit. The cost for students and parents, for an already expensive college education, is reduced by thousands of dollars. Nearby, a student in Sunburst School District graduated last year from North Toole County High School with about one year of college completed. At the University of Montana (Go Griz) that comes to about \$18,000; for Montana State University (Go Bobcats), students and parents would save about \$16,000. That is real money.

For many years the focus at most high schools has been to prepare our students to go to college. Several years ago “they” (the academic ivory towers and state legislatures) “discovered” that not all of our students will go to college (something that teachers have always known). In fact, while the number of students entering college right out of high school has been increasing, the percentage of students who complete a bachelor’s degree has remained virtually unchanged for more than 50 years.

The K-12 educational system, and the parents and communities who support it, have begun to refocus their efforts on something that they already know needs to be done: the focus of education in our K-12 schools, and especially our high schools, must be to prepare all of our students for life after they complete high school – whether it is college, a career, or the military.

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What does all of the above mean for the students who attend schools in the Conrad Public School system?

In order for our students to be successful in life after high school, a K-12 education must provide opportunities for our students on their way to college to take dual credit college courses and for our students who have made other choices for their life to take Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses. The focus of state legislatures and state boards of education around the country has turned to providing increased funding to our schools so that we may increase our dual credit course offerings and our CTE course offerings. In Montana, HB 356 is making its way through both houses and will (if passed) greatly expand the amount of money available to school districts to expand and develop CTE opportunities for our students.

Through the proactive thinking and efforts of many legislators and educators, the opportunities for all of our students to access online learning courses are growing dramatically. Our legislators have come to realize and understand what we in the educational community have always known – the objective and goals of K-12 education is to prepare all of our students for life after high school, whether it is college, a career, or the military. Expanded online learning opportunities are the key to that preparation in 2015.

Online learning is no longer just a “nice to have” resource for our students; it is an essential skill for our students to have if they are to be successful in life after high school. Online learning and the necessity for our schools to develop our students’ access, skills, and abilities to use online learning courses is a mandatory skill for our students to have, if they are to be successful in today’s world. Those students who fail to have (or to take) the opportunity to develop their online learning skills will be left behind – stuck in low paying jobs. And that

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includes all students who graduate from any high school in America – even in Conrad, Montana.

Conrad Public Schools must continue to be proactive and a leader in expanding its online learning opportunities for our students. For us to do anything else, we would be grossly negligent in our duty to provide our students with the essential and effective education opportunities available online.

Online instruction and learning is a ubiquitous part of our world today. It is used by farmers, in factories, in the service industry, by medical professionals, and by every major (and minor) corporation in the world. We cannot hide from, or deny the fact that, in order for our students to become successful, they must be able to access and operate in the digital world. That fact is not going away and the digital world is growing by leaps and bounds (you might even say exponentially).

Conrad Public Schools cannot stand by and allow our students to be left behind. We must provide our students with every opportunity and advantage that is available to the other students with whom they will compete in college and the world of work. Expanding the online opportunities for our students will only enhance student opportunities and options to an even higher level.