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INSIGHT

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GUEST COLUMN
JAMES BRAUER

Digital ed can improve Iowa learning

This week, educators across the country, including many in Iowa, are celebrating Digital Learning Day. It's an important date to recognize as the world continues to grapple with the new reality of life amid the pandemic.

Created 10 years ago, Digital Learning Day aims to expand awareness for opportunities to learn via digital tools, whether inside or outside a traditional classroom. This past year, however, many families found themselves using digital learning tools more frequently than before. And while online learning is powerful and effective, the overnight shift from full-time in-person schooling to full-time distance learning proved challenging for many students.

As a principal at a full-time online public school for more than eight years, I've had the opportunity to experience the value digital innovation has brought to the education sector. Students have resources at their fingertips that allow them to learn in ways that had been unimaginable to past generations.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, digital learning tools became a critical need overnight. The shift to emergency distance learning forced educators to quickly evolve and stand up new technologies to keep students learning, often taking a trial-and-error approach. As we have all witnessed, this shift was not without monumental challenges and, in some cases, created learning gaps for students. Many students and parents have discovered that this crisis distance learning model does not work for them due to their family circumstances or their student's learning style.

Unfortunately, this frustration with a forced learning-at-home model has resulted in a tendency to equate distance learning with the full-time online learning model. In a recent meeting with online educators, some of my colleagues expressed how often they had heard in recent months the sweeping generalization that full-time online education does not work. Dismissal of this learning model is disappointing and is a disservice to students, especially because I've seen firsthand so much evidence to the contrary. Full-time online schools are equipped with a learning portal and a curriculum that have been specially built for an online learning environment and tested to ensure positive learning outcomes. Teachers at full-time online schools are trained to teach in an online setting in a way that values both the learning experience and each student's social and emotional well-being.

In the past eight years working in the full-time online environment, my biggest take-away is that every student is unique, and no two students learn or absorb lessons in the same way. I've witnessed students enroll in our full-time online school and flourish, despite having struggled in their previous classroom environment. Conversely, we've had students enroll in our school who ultimately decided that full-time online learning was not the best fit for them or their family.

As both an educator and parent, I understand how difficult this past year has been. However, as we honor Digital Learning Day and reflect on all that has happened since March 2020, I urge my fellow Iowans not to dismiss the power of online education entirely. We can use lessons from the past year to continue to improve education, and ultimately provide more learning options, for our state's students.

James Brauer is principal at Iowa Connections Academy.