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Cyber Charter Schools: The End of Public Education or a New Beginning?

November 22, 2010 07:11 AM





By Weintana Abraha

The one commonality educators have regarding online schools, particularly cyber charter schools, is a passionate opinion about their contribution to American education. The politics and turf war between traditional (also known as brick-and-mortar) and online schools have made it difficult to collect public, non-partisan data on virtual charter schools and online education in general.

Currently, 39 states and the District of Columbia have charter schools; of the nearly 5000 charter schools across the country, 217 are virtual or cyber charter schools. Additionally, there are hundreds of private and university-run online high schools along with a growing number of brick-and-mortar schools adding online components to their teaching.

Critics' have two primary complaints: that it is difficult, if not impossible, for virtual schools to provide quality education. An Arizona State University study of virtual schools critiqued Knowledge Universe, a conglomerate of online schools. "The curriculum is not interesting and it promotes a one-size-fits-all approach. The instruction is mechanical and the system does not encourage creativity." Advocates counter that cyber charter education is the solution for students who are under-stimulated, overlooked, or face disciplinary and/or health issues that traditional schools are ill equipped to deal with. "We get both ends of it: kids who have failed out and kids pursuing careers while going to high school." says Fred Miller, a communications coordinator with the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School. Moriah Conant, a PCCS sophomore agrees. "I like charter in general because they offer flexibility and it's a great opportunity to have a good education and still do other things like ballet or professional sports."

Additionally, cyber schools must meet the same standards as their brick-and-mortar counterparts. "All the [cyber charter] schools have to take the standardized PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) tests and meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act," explains Miller. "If you don't make AYP, you're labeled a failing school." Accredited non-charter schools online must have profiles with education watchdog groups in their region.

Another charge against charter and cyber charter education is that they drain essential funding away from public school districts. In a recent Kansas City Star article, Pennsylvania's Auditor General, Jack Wagner—a one-time proponent of charter schools—discussed plans to halt new funding for charter and cyber charter education, citing the schools as a hurdle to efficient public school spending. Wagner said, "I cannot turn a blind eye to the inefficiencies in the way charter and cyber-charter schools are funded in Pennsylvania." But according to the Center for Education Reform's website, cyber charter (and charter) schools often receive 66-75% of state funding per student versus public school districts.

Online educators, however, say that they are providing the best possible educational experiences for students who are often overlooked in mainstream public schools—minorities, children in poorer urban



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arby . November 22, 2010 08:20 AM . [Permalink](#)
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In Pennsylvania, the AG is the taxpayer's watchdog. AG Wagner's audit is available at his web site. Charter and cyber charter education spending now totals one billion dollars in Pennsylvania. The funding is allocated by formula which is arcane to say the least. About \$240 million of the funds go to the school districts which lost students to cyber or charter schools. How does that make any sense? The cyber or charter schools receive the same money per student as the public schools from which the child comes (highest cost districts, thus tend to attract the most charter and cyber schools because as Willie Sutton said 'that is where the money is'). There is no competitive aspect to which these private businesses are subject and that would tend to keep costs lower for taxpayers because compensation would more closely reflect costs. That makes no sense at all. Finally, a significant number of charter schools in the highest cost district – Philadelphia – are under investigation by the FBI. AG Wagner does support these types of alternative education options. He just does not want the taxpayers ripped off.

Janet I JONES . November 24, 2010 10:18 PM . [Permalink](#)
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Who is AG?

Fred . November 22, 2010 03:35 PM . [Permalink](#)
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Arby is incorrect when he/she said, "The cyber or charter schools receive the same money per student as the public schools from which the child comes." In Pennsylvania, cybers receive 75-80 percent of what the home district spends per student. The state then reimburses the home district 30 percent of the cyber tuition it pays out. So the home districts keep about half the tax dollars for students they don't have to educate. As for his/her assertion that charters go after districts with the highest per-pupil cost, that's also false. Half the charter schools in Pa. are located in Philadelphia because the Philly schools are so bad – they graduate 27 percent of their students. Also wrong is his/her statement that they are "private businesses." Every charter and cyber charter in Pa. is a public school with a public board of directors and open meetings. There are no owners or shareholders. Wagner is right that there is inequity in public education funding – there has been for many years, but he just noticed because maybe 2 percent of the students have opted out for charters and cyber charters. Cyber charters receive unequal funding from districts, but give the same education to each child no matter what his or her zip code.

Matzpen . November 22, 2010 04:37 PM . [Permalink](#)
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Day-to-day human interaction with teachers and professors, it may not have fit neatly into some Fordist time management efficiency schemes of the school-"reformers", but it is that interaction which actually educates and enriches the lives of students.

<http://sherrytalksback.wordpress.com/2010/11/17/alienation-101/>

Hoosier Mom . November 22, 2010 07:04 PM . [Permalink](#)
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The best thing about my kid's virtual charter is that the school allows capable children to achieve. No more holding bright kids back so everyone can learn in lockstep. Excellence is the norm and many children rise to meet new expectations. As far as I know, no other elementary school in the state allows a sixth grader to take algebra.

Dana Koch . November 23, 2010 07:12 AM . [Permalink](#)

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In an article recently published in “Edweek” the data collected from full-time virtual schools in the state of Pennsylvania supports a more cautious approach for the rest of the nation. “Cyber Charter” schools have been operating in the state for the past 10 years. According to the article, in the most recent year with available data, the 2008/2009 academic year, 7 of the 11 cyber charter schools did not make “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP). In addition, the graduation rate from these cyber charter schools averaged 77%, far below the state average of 89%. Finally, fewer than 66% of graduating students went on to further education as compared to 75% of students graduating from traditional schools. The PA Cyber Charter school does a good job but it is not representative of the quality seen in the majority of cyber schools.

Ann . November 23, 2010 02:15 PM . [Permalink](#)

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My son suffers from a chronic disease that our public high school flatly refused to accommodate. While agonizing over what to do, I discovered that he was a 9th grader, making As and Bs, but he could not think critically nor write coherently. His accredited online high school’s college prep program allowed him to excel in both areas. He is now a successful freshman at a major university. We were fortunate in our choice of schools, and also fortunate that the local YMCA would work with him as an employee, which provided him with ample social experiences and a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. For those students who do not “fit the mold,” for whatever reason, an alternative is crucial, in my opinion.

MRM . November 23, 2010 03:47 PM . [Permalink](#)

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Some people talk about online classes as a miracle of the new technology and THE way of the future. Virtual schooling should be considered as an *option* for some (as long as they are provided with other opportunities to communicate and collaborate with others—a crucial skill and something the “tuned-out” kids growing up today who never give any one thing their full attention badly need).

I dread a situation where it becomes the only option, and until people making the decisions have actually taken at least one class online, they are not in a position to evaluate properly.

Personally, I have taken several college courses online (as the only option for specific classes I needed for my degree) and see numerous disadvantages. Ideally, a hybrid model would be better, IMO.

[Gordon Dryden](#) . November 23, 2010 03:54 PM . [Permalink](#)

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In New Zealand all schools—public and private—are charter schools. For 20 years now, New Zealand has abolished its national Department of Education and its regional Education Boards. Instead, government funding goes direct to each school, and is administered by each school’s Board of Trustees. More importantly, each board draws up its own “charter” with a scaled-down policy-advising Ministry of Education. That charter has two parts: 1) to achieve national curriculum guidelines; and 2) to excel in areas and disciplines chosen by each school under programs called “Tomorrow’s Schools”. Thus a school might chose to excel in “21st-century technology or literacy”, “multi-cultural societies” (the main city, Auckland, has the world’s

largest Polynesian population—ahead of Honolulu). In the international PISA examinations (to test 15-year-olds on their ability to apply education to real-world knowledge, New Zealand ranks third in the world for literacy, fourth for science and in the top ten for mathematics. Finland ranks top in all three. It might help America’s “teach to the test” K-12 education system to visit schools in both countries. Gordo Dryden, co-author, The Learning Revolution series of books, Auckland, New Zealand.

bubbables . November 25, 2010 06:25 AM . [Permalink](#)
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Gordon, what the author is describing is a homeschool/cyber school hybrid. Students are plugging into their course material from home or wherever they access the web. Cyber schools fall under the public school umbrella, but the connection is made predominately online.

Sara . November 24, 2010 06:48 PM . [Permalink](#)
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It’s essentially taxpayer funded homeschooling. I have no problem with it as that, however the amount that those schools receive should not be close to the amount that traditional public schools receive. Public schools provide educational materials and teach and supervise and transport and feed and entertain kids for six hours a day, online schools provide students with content and tutoring. The two are not comparable.

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