

## Public Charter School Enrolling Homeschoolers

by Howard Richman

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Pennsylvania's first public homeschooling option, the Western Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School (WPCCS), will begin this fall. Homeschoolers who participate will either take their courses over the Internet using non-religious-based correspondence-school curricula or take them in person at a local community college. They will get software and computers in their homes, an assigned teacher to talk with in person or by phone, standardized testing, and all the materials and supplies that they will need. They will also be invited to attend a monthly seminar in Midland, Beaver County. Charter schools do not charge tuition, so all of these services will be free.

It all started back in 1997 when Governor Ridge managed to pass a charter school law designed, as he said in an August 26 1997 speech, to "inject a healthy dose of innovation and parental empowerment into Pennsylvania's public schools." The new law encouraged parents, teachers, and community leaders to come up with proposals for new public schools that would be chartered by, but not controlled by, the local school districts. The new law gave local school boards the power to decide whether or not to "charter" these independent public schools.

Meanwhile, the Midland Borough School District was wrestling with problems of its own. Back in 1986 they had closed their high school due the high cost of maintaining a high school for less than 150 students. The neighboring Pennsylvania districts were less than friendly about admitting Midland students, partly because many of these students were poor. After busing their students to the Beaver Area School District for a few years, Midland was forced to send its high school students an hour each way to a school district in Ohio. Then a parent approached the district asking if the district could start a charter school in order to give Midland parents a new option.

When the Midland Borough School District decided to start WPCCS, they had no problem getting permission since they were the local school district. Their original plan was to enroll just 25 students for the first year of operation, but by the end of July they had already received about 400 applications, only a few of them from their district. They plan to hire one certified teacher for every 50 students enrolled. For every out-of-district student that they enroll, they will receive about \$6,000 from that student's home district. "It's really turned into a program that's entrepreneurial," Midland Superintendent Dr. Nick Trombetta was quoted as saying in a July 9, 2000, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article.

Many other states have had cyber-charter schools for years, and WPCCS is not even the first cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania. (That honor goes to a the SusQ-Cyber Charter School which was designed to provide "in-depth and varied" courses to public high school students in the Bloomsburg-Berwick-Milton area.) However, WPCCS is the first in the state that is both elementary and secondary and that is actually inviting homeschool enrollment.

Other charter schools have found that enrolling homeschoolers solves another problem. Charter schools are usually required to demonstrate that their students are achieving well

on standardized achievement tests and homeschoolers have generally done so. For example, the Hickman Charter School, a similar charter school in California, once reported that its 550 homeschooled students in grades K-8 scored 20 to 30 percentiles higher than local public school students on the California standardized achievement test.

Enrolled students would not be participants in home education programs and so would not file a home education affidavit with their local school district or graduate with diplomas from home education organizations such as PHAA. They would be public school students, enrolled in a public school, and eligible to receive a public school diploma from WPCCS.

According to Dr. Trombetta, WPCCS hopes to enroll: (1) those students who are home-bound because of illness, (2) those students who are homeschooled because of parental choice, (3) those students who are unable to attend a school because of difficulties in the traditional setting due to poor behavior or poor attendance, and (4) those students who wish to accelerate by taking college courses for high school credit. It will only enroll families when there will be a parent home during the school day to provide adult supervision and involvement.

The presence of this charter school option could change the balance of power between homeschoolers and their local districts. A homeschooler who is upset by the treatment he or she is getting from a local school district could enroll in WPCCS at the cost to the district of several thousand dollars. I imagine that this could make the districts much more appreciative of those of us who are paying for our own students' educations. There is already one homeschooling mother using possible enrollment in WPCCS as a bargaining chip in the negotiations to get her school district to let her daughter play on the high school soccer team.

I expect an outcry from other school districts when they receive the bills for their homeschooled students to attend this cyber-charter school. Some may start their own cyber-charter schools in order to keep the money within their own district. Some may try to get the legislature to change the charter school law in order to limit cyber-charter schools. Dr. Trombetta is not worried about what other districts think. He still resents the way neighboring districts have closed their doors to his high school students.

Some homeschoolers will decide to participate in WPCCS for the financial help, some for the educational help. Some who might not homeschool otherwise will participate. But don't expect all homeschoolers to take advantage of this new option. Most homeschoolers will prefer the flexibility and independence of private home education.

Some homeschoolers will actually oppose this public homeschooling option. For example in the May/June, 2000, issue of Home School Legal Defense Association's (HSLDA) Home School Court Report, Dee Black opposed a similar public-homeschooling option in Alaska because it permitted government interference with homeschooling and did not permit the purchase of "distinctively religious" curriculum materials for teaching core subjects.

However, if you would appreciate a teacher's help, outside structure, and public financing of your educational costs, there is now a new option for you here in Pennsylvania. If you are interested, e-mail or call WPCCS admissions secretary Charlene Freund ([wpcacs@midlandpa.org](mailto:wpcacs@midlandpa.org), 724-643-1180) for an application. Once you have submitted your

application, you and your prospective students will meet with the charter school staff for an interview and for a computer generated assessment in math and reading. After the meeting you will find out if you have been accepted. At this point, WPCCS is just admitting Western Pennsylvania students, but they expect to expand to include the whole state.