

Anti-Cyber-Charter Bill Fails in Senate

from Howard Richman

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On May 22, 2001, a bill was introduced in the Pennsylvania Senate (Senate Bill 891) to kill Pennsylvania's new public home education option -- the cyber-charter schools. It passed out of the Senate Education Committee with strong bipartisan support. Then, instead of going to the Appropriations Committee for a price tag, it went straight to the Senate Floor. SB 891 was clearly on the fast track. The school year was starting soon and the opponents of cyber-charters wanted their bill to pass by July 1, before the new crop of cyber-charter schools could get off the ground.

However, Senate Bill 891 did not pass due to opposition from Gov. Ridge's, some homeschoolers, cyber-charter school enrollees, and others who favor choice in education. As Senator Mike Waugh pointed out to me in an e-mail:

You should know that, on June 21st, the legislation was removed from consideration by the full Senate and re-referred to the Senate Rules and Executive Nominations Committee. It is highly unlikely that the SB 891 will receive any formal consideration until the fall. And, given the amount of opposition to the bill, it is doubtful that the bill will come before the full Senate in its current form.

When the House and Senate recessed for the summer, they passed a bill which called upon the PA Department of Education to do some summer homework to investigate the costs of the cyber-charter schools while the legislators went on vacation. The PA Department of Education will report its findings to the legislature by October 30. At that point a compromise will be passed that will preserve the cyber-charter schools, but change how they are funded and regulated.

House Education Committee Hearings

On August 9, 2001, the House Education Committee held hearings in order to get feedback on HB 1733, a compromise bill sponsored by its chairman, Jess Stairs. It would move cyber-charter funding and oversight from the school districts to the PA Department of Education and put the cyber-charters in a whole new legal category separate from other charter schools.

I was one of those on a diverse panel who testified at the hearings. [[Click here](#) for my testimony.] I urged the representatives to preserve the cyber-charter schools and make sure that their students would have access to school sports and to vocational-technical schools. In order to help the legislators visualize the students who would be involved in the school sports, I told about two former homeschoolers, Amy Wohar and Jason Taylor. I said:

Under current law, local school districts must let charter school students participate in their school sports and extra-curricular activities. Thus HB 1733 would take away something that is currently in place. Last year, 4 of the 529 students enrolled in Western Pennsylvania Cyber

Charter School (WPCCS) played on public school sports teams. The Pittsburgh Post Gazette on August 29, 2000, reported that one of those students, Amy Wohar, was pleased that the Cyber-charter school law let her play high school soccer and volleyball and participate in theater though her local school district would not have let her participate as a homeschooled student....

When you think of school sports, think of Jason Taylor, the most financially successful graduate, thus far, of a Pennsylvania home education program. I was reminded of him when I read in the July 29 Pittsburgh Tribune-Review that his parents have enrolled their three school-age children in the Allegheny Intermediate Unit's cyber-charter school. Just a few days earlier, 26-year-old Jason, signed a six-year \$42 million contract as a defensive end with the Miami Dolphins. Jason is not only a star athlete but has also been involved in many charitable activities. He almost missed his chance to play school sports in high school and college, despite his strong academic and athletic abilities... If you continue to allow cyber-charter school students on the public school sports teams, you may be helping our society produce other positive role models like Jason Taylor.

There are many issues that remain to be resolved when the legislature returns this fall. These include whether cyber-charter students will be given access to public school sports and v-tech, the amount of cyber-charter school funding, and the amount of regulation of the cyber-charter schools by the PA Department of Education. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly clear that the cyber-charter option will survive, giving Pennsylvania leadership in yet another area of home education:

1. We are one of two states whose beginning compulsory school age is 8. (The other is Washington.)
2. We are one of two states that recognize homeschool diplomas issued by homeschool organizations. (The other is South Carolina.)
3. Now we are one of the first states to have both a private and a public home education option. Those who choose our new public home education option will receive a computer, an internet hook-up, free non-religious curricula, and teachers that are available and ready to help. On the other hand, they will lose the flexibility that many long-term homeschoolers have come to appreciate and will be held accountable to complete assigned work by the staff of the cybercharter schools who will interact with the family on a regular basis.

Some of you may want to discuss the cyber-charter school bills with your legislators when you come to Harrisburg for Homeschool Excellence Day on October 3. But at the press conference we will not mention the cyber-charter schools. We will instead focus upon the success of private home education in Pennsylvania.