

TEACH Cyber-Charter on Verge of Collapse

by Howard Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 78 (Spring 2002) of the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.]

On March 19, Commonwealth Court will hear the case that will determine whether or not TEACH (The Einstein Academy CHarter School) will get sufficient funds from the PA Department of Education to finish out this school year. The hearing will take place at 1 PM in Court Room #1 of the fifth floor of the South Office Building of the Capitol Complex in Harrisburg. A few days later, the court should issue its decision.

Even if they win at the hearing, they probably will be shut down on March 27. The Morrisville School District has demanded that TEACH: (1) drop Tutorbots as its managing company, (2) move its headquarters to Morrisville, (3) prove that they are providing special education services, (4) account for money spent, and do all of the above in time for a March 26 hearing. If they do not, then on March 27 Morrisville School Board says that they will vote to take away TEACH's charter.

TEACH is one of five new cyber-charter schools that opened last fall in PA joining the two already existing cyber-charters that were giving PA families new public education choices. It was originally founded by a group led by Miriam Rothschild and Howard Mandel, a long-term homeschooling couple who, after helping one of their children survive medical-mismanagement of a near-fatal illness, had also become child-advocates. They had developed Tutorbots, a successful business which featured an on-line cartoon character that made instruction friendly and they hoped to establish a cyber-charter school that would help parents provide an excellent education at home.

Last year they proposed their cyber-charter school idea to district after district throughout PA. (Under current charter school law in PA, school districts have the right to give charters to newly formed schools.) They finally found a very small Bucks County School District in Morrisville that was willing to give them a charter. TEACH agreed to pay the Morrisville School District \$200 per student enrolled and also agreed to lease space and custodial services from Morrisville for \$35,000 per year. The arrangement appeared to be mutually beneficial.

Then TEACH sent out mailings to homeschooling families across the state which promised those families that they would continue to be in charge of their children's education, would get free computers and Internet access, and could even use Christian materials such as Alpha Omega math and Apologia science as part of the TEACH program. Their mailings were so effective that they were able to enroll 3300 students, most of them homeschoolers, making them the largest cyber-charter school in the state and the one most heavily composed of former homeschoolers.

Then reality set in. The Department of Education ended last year's practice of paying "start-up" costs so TEACH didn't have the money to buy computers and textbooks. TEACH tried to bill school district for summer classes, but school districts refused to pay and instead filed court suits. Families received their computers and textbooks late. Disorganization was

rampant. Staff turnover was high. Clarified requirements coming from the state and from court cases forced TEACH to institute new procedures which left parents much less in charge. Judges ruled in Butler and Adams counties that local students were disenrolled. TEACH was forced in mid-year by some publishers, including Apologia science, to drop use of on-line materials that they were using but had not paid for. Soon parents were complaining about disorganized courses, broken promises, and new rules. Forty percent of the students who began the year with TEACH had already left the program by the beginning of March.

Meanwhile, trouble was also brewing for them at the PA Department of Education. Last fall, TEACH raised suspicions when they refused to cooperate with a cyber-charter school audit, ordered by the legislature. The Department had also received complaints from disgruntled parents and suspected that TEACH might not be providing adequate services to its special education students.

On February 7, Charles Zogby, Secretary of Education, urged the Morrisville School District to investigate whether TEACH was fulfilling its charter. The next day, he filed a suit in Commonwealth Court against both TEACH and the Morrisville School District and decided to stop paying school district funds it was collecting for TEACH pending outcome of the court case.

In response, on February 19 TEACH parents organized a rally in the Capitol Rotunda in Harrisburg. About 250 Einstein Academy students and parents filled the rotunda steps carrying signs that read "Save Our School," "PA Districts Break the Law," and "I Love Einstein." Eleventh grade student, Shanna Wood from Perry County was one of those who addressed the crowd. "Deciding to shut down the school would leave thousands with nowhere to go," Shanna said.

Then on February 20, TEACH lawyers asked Commonwealth Court to hear the court case within two weeks so that the school would not have to shut down. The court put the hearing on the docket for March 19, the earliest date available. In the meantime, Tutorbots loaned TEACH the additional money needed to operate until the hearing.

If TEACH does collapse, Tutorbots may not be the only one to lose money. Some of the parents involved may get stuck paying for phone lines that they had installed expecting reimbursement and some may possibly lose security deposits.

Although the future for TEACH looks bleak, this is not true of the other cyber-charter schools. For example, the Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School, which uses the curriculum of Bill Bennett's K12 organization, is planning to expand their grade offerings through fifth grade next year, instead of just through second grade.

The main danger to the other cyber-charters is a planned bill that could be voted on in June that would take all of the cyber-charter schools out of local school district control and put them under PA Department of Education supervision. Such a bill might reduce the ability of the cyber-charter schools to expand and might take away automatic access of cyber-charter school students to local school district sports.

In the past the PA Department of Education has opposed such bills. They have asked that the cyber-charter schools be left under the charter school law and that the charter school law not be changed. But the \$200 that Morrisville School District was to receive per TEACH student was an embarrassment to the charter school law. It is possible that the Department of Education took action against TEACH in order to save the charter school law.

Although TEACH may soon be gone, the cyber-charter school option appears to be here to stay.