

PA House Holds Hearings on Cyber-Charter Funding

by Howard Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 94 (Spring, 2006) of the PENNSYLVANIA HOMESCHOOLERS® newsletter.]

On January 18, 2006, the Pennsylvania House Education Committee held hearings to discuss possible changes in the funding of Pennsylvania cyber-charter schools. After the hearing, committee chairman Jess Stairs told reporters that the funding system has to change, but he did not yet know what those changes should be. Currently the local school districts pay the cyber-charter schools about two-thirds of the amount that it would cost them to educate the same child.

Cyber-Charter School	Oct '04	Oct '05
PA Virtual Charter School	4038	4559
PA Cyber Charter School	3021	4475
PA Leadership Charter Sch.	335	1011
Commonwealth Connections	626	985
PA Learners Online Regional	498	600
PA Distance Learning	228	575
21st Century Cyber Charter	332	312
Achievement House Charter	101	276
Central PA Digital Learning	160	156
Midwestern Regional	127	131
SusQ-Cyber Charter School	121	119
Agora Cyber Charter School	---	29
Total	9,587	13,228

Although the focus of the hearings was supposed to be cyber-charter school funding, the public education establishment seemed more interested in slowing their growth. They

focused on reducing the numbers and profits of cyber-charter schools. Yet parental choice among competing cyber-charters is causing some cyber-charters to grow, while others shrink. The table below shows that Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, PA Leadership Charter School, Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School, and PA Learners Online Regional are all growing especially rapidly.

Instead of encouraging this healthy competition, the Pennsylvania School Board Association (PSBA) called for a moratorium on the creation of new cyber-charter schools and for taking all of the profit out of cyber-charter school operation. Specifically, they called for punishing those that operate efficiently. One of their main bullets was, "The current formula... requires most districts to fund cyber-charter schools at a rate that is higher than the per-student instructional expense of the cyber-charter school, resulting in a net profit for those schools."

Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) treasurer Grace Beart called for more regulation and research holding that the present rules (which shut down charter schools if their students are not making educational progress on state tests) are not sufficient. Specifically, she called for more constraints upon cyber-charter school curriculum and for new ways to test for progress in meeting non-academic student needs. She wrote, "PSEA is concerned that we are embarking on a great educational experiment using Cyber School children, without even pausing to see if this is educationally beneficial at a time when we are aware of no research that considers the child development impact of online education."

At the hearings, Midland School District Superintendent and Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School CEO Nick Trombetta defended the cyber-charter schools. "Support, don't punish, innovation and success in public education," he wrote. He then challenged his fellow public educators: " Pennsylvania should demand excellence and accountability from our public education system. We can achieve this by supporting the innovations offered by high-quality, highly performing public schools -- including cyber schools"

According to statistics available from the PA Department of Education, enrollment in cyber-charter schools has continued to grow rapidly in Pennsylvania from 9,587 in October 2004 to 13,228 in the October 2005. Meanwhile the number of students in private home education has been slowly declining from 24,076 in June 2004 to 23,287 in June 2005. If you combine the two groups-- private homeschoolers with cyberschoolers, the total number of PA students in one form or other of home education has been growing steadily as shown in the graph below. Some families even combine both types of educating at home, with some enrolled in cyberschool, and other children doing private home education.

