

APPENDIX E

STATE SAMPLING, POORLY RATED ARTICLES

Note: Sections bolded in green show why each article was rated poorly. The phrase in parentheses is how our analysts scored in The Media Bullpen© scored the story. Using baseball language, articles could be given a score of home run, triple, double, single, pop fly or strike out, with home run being the best and strike out being the worst. For more information, please go to <http://www.mediabullpen.com/scores>

NORTHEASTERN STATES

Augusta panel rejects 4 of 5 proposals for new charter schools

PORTLAND PRESS HERALD

1/8/13

(Pop fly)

Maine's Charter School Commission has rejected four of the five charter school applications under consideration for 2013, including both proposals for virtual schools.

The seven-member panel gave initial approval Tuesday to the Harpswell Coastal Academy, which would serve grades 6 to 12 in the Harpswell, Brunswick and Freeport area.

"We really do see ourselves as part of the set of public school opportunities in the area," said John D'Anieri, Harpswell Coastal Academy's school design consultant. "I'm a lifelong educator, and the folks I am working with in this want to create another great public school rather than bash existing ones."

The Harpswell school says it intends to offer "personalized, project-based education" and would start with 40 to 80 students, half of them in the sixth grade and half in the ninth. Several steps remain before it can receive a charter, including public hearings.

The other four applications before the commission were denied, including three "brick-and-mortar" schools – the Heartwood Charter School in Kennebunk, Queen City Academy in Bangor and Monson Academy in Monson – and two virtual schools, Maine Virtual Academy and Maine Connections Academy.

The rejected applications had one thing in common, said Roger W. Brainerd, executive director of the Maine Association for Charter Schools.

“Pretty much across the board, their boards didn’t show enough independence in their governance, and our law is very prescriptive about that,” he said. “We think it’s critical that we have Maine people running the schools that are close to the local situations and know what the communities need and have the capacity to support the school.”

Gov. Paul LePage plans to introduce legislation that would allow an unlimited number of charter schools in Maine. The state law passed in 2011 to authorize charter schools set a limit of 10 in the next 10 years.

Two charter schools – the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences in Fairfield and the Cornville Regional Charter School – are open. Two more – the Baxter Academy for Technology and Science in Portland and the Fiddlehead School of Arts and Science in Gray – have conditional approval.

Charter schools receive public funding but are run by parents, teachers and community leaders. The state’s largest teachers union opposes lifting the cap on charter schools, arguing that they could effectively drain resources from public school districts.

Tuesday’s vote was a setback for digital charter schools, in which students get the vast majority of their education online, at home, with taxpayers in their school districts paying the tuition.

The schools were proposed by rival national companies, K12 Inc. of Herndon, Va., and Connections Learning, the Baltimore-based subsidiary of the publishing giant Pearson.

The companies were the subject of a Maine Sunday Telegram investigation, published Sept. 2, that showed how they were shaping Maine’s digital education policies and how their schools in other states have fared poorly in studies of students’ achievement.

While the virtual schools would have been governed by local boards, the out-of-state companies would have had broad management powers including hiring and firing of administrators and teachers, and the provision of academic content and the student assessment data on which the schools might be judged.

In the end, Charter School Commission members were troubled by the local governing boards’ perceived lack of independence and the ability of the companies to successfully oversee the schools remotely.

A subcommittee had recommended that the virtual schools be rejected, saying it had “no confidence” in K12 Inc.’s ability to manage Maine Virtual Academy without any in-state staff.

The company, co-founded by the convicted junk bond trader Michael Milken and former federal education secretary William J. Bennett, is the subject of an ongoing investigation in Florida over allegations that it used uncertified teachers and pressured employees to help in concealing it.

Peter Mills, executive director of the Maine Turnpike Authority and secretary of the Maine Virtual Academy, expressed frustration about the criticism of the school's governance.

“My reason for being involved in all this was to make sure that Maine people would be in control and that it would be done in a proper way,” Mills said. “You needed a board that would be capable of exercising some control over the contractor and by the same token compelling the corporation to produce.”

“We think (K12 Inc.) is capable of producing because they have enormous resources,” said Mills.

He said it's likely that the school will apply for a charter in future years. “I think our application was pretty good.”

Both of the proposed schools filed applications with the Charter School Commission last year in hopes of opening this fall.

Commissioners set the applications aside, expressing concerns about their own competence to judge the complex proposals in short order and the possible lack of independence of the local boards.

LePage criticized that decision in a letter dated June 11, in which he suggested that the commissioners reconsider the virtual schools or resign.

The head of the state's largest teachers union expressed satisfaction with the commission's decisions Tuesday.

“The MEA is very pleased to hear that particularly the two virtual schools are not still in the running,” said Maine Education Association President Lois Kilby-Chesley. “We are very pleased that there seems to be a process of thoughtful consideration for the schools that are applying.”

On that point, Brainerd of the charter schools association agreed.

“Online education is coming, and we need to deal with it, and it's better to take more time than to rush into something,” he said. “Much as we would like to see something going, it's better to get it going right from the beginning.”

East Lycoming reviews cyber school tuition

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

4/26/13

(Strike out)

Outreach for behaviorally challenged students and cyber and charter school tuition were topics of discussion at the East Lycoming School Board meeting, held Tuesday evening.

Principals Sherry Cowburn, of Ashkar Elementary, and Tommy Coburn, of Hughesville Junior High School, both reported that they had seen great success from the district's Positive Behavior Recognition program, which rewards and recognizes students for good behavior throughout the school day.

Board member Richard Bradley praised the district's high number of well-behaved students. However, he worried that the district isn't doing enough to involve its small population of at-risk or behaviorally challenged students.

"I worry about those kids who have made bad decisions. What are we doing to help them and make them vested in the school environment?" Bradley asked.

Bradley said he understood that, in some cases, poorly behaved students need to be expelled for their own safety and for the safety of other students. Expelled individuals may end up attending a cyber school program to continue their education.

"I'm not sure if or when we could bring students back after an expulsion. But having them at home all day is isolating.

They're attending cyber schools, which I believe is the worst educational means for this particular group of at-risk kids," Bradley said.

Cyber school and charter school attendees also place a heavy financial burden on the school district. According to Superintendent Michael Pawlik, the district spent an estimated \$400,000 on charter and cyber school tuition in the 2012-13 school year.

During the meeting, the board adopted a resolution that calls for the reform of the state's charter and cyber school funding formula. The resolution asks that the state come up with a cyber and charter school funding formula "based on the actual cost of educating students ... at the charter school."

The current funding formula calculates the cost of educating a student at a cyber charter school by focusing on the cost of educating that same student at a traditional school, according to Pawlik.

Ex-lobbyist: Public education endangered

OAK RIDGER

5/29/13

From school vouchers to charter schools, a former Tennessee Education Association lobbyist painted a verbal portrait of an endangered public education system at a recent “Lunch with the League” meeting.

“A lot of things happening in public education are not good,” Jerry Winters, retired Tennessee Education Association chief lobbyist, told a crowded room of area residents gathered for the League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge-sponsored event at the Oak Ridge Unitarian Universalist Church.

Those “things” he identified included school vouchers, charter schools, virtual schools and officials across the nation experiencing close to “mania” about student testing.

In-fighting among Tennessee’s Republicans in the Legislature was the only reason school voucher legislation wasn’t approved in the recent legislative session, Winters opined.

“People are wanting to privatize the public schools,” Winters said. He told League members he was glad the National League of Women Voters had spoken out about school vouchers, a method in which the taxpayer dollars allocated for educating a student “follows” the student if he or she decides to go to a private school. Winters called it a way to rob public education, which he said is already in need, and send the money to private schools.

“The private schools will take care of themselves,” Winters said.

“I’m no big fan of charter schools,” he admitted, explaining he lobbied against charter schools for 10 years. Charter schools also can get taxpayers dollars to operate and can be established by nonprofit groups, universities and companies.

“What happened to local control,” Winters asked. He called attention to Great Hearts Academies, based in Arizona, that had wanted to open schools in the Metro Nashville area, but were denied by local school board members.

A major issue on the charter schools in this past Tennessee legislative session was taking the power to authorize charter schools away from local school boards and giving it to the Tennessee Board of Education. It was an issue Oak Ridge Board of Education member Angi Agle warned about during one recent School Board meeting. The measure failed, Winters said, because of more in-fighting in the Legislature.

He predicted the Oak Ridge area would eventually have a charter school, perhaps started by someone unhappy with the public school system for some reason.

Discussing virtual schools, in which K-12 students take online classes, Winters said one county has entered into an agreement with a company for virtual schools. He said the company gets the majority of the educational dollars the governments provide for education.

“Public education is not the place to go to make a fortune,” he said. “It’s the place to educate 90 percent of the children.

“We need to be talking about the 90 percent (of children), not the 10 percent” Winter said. The 10 percent is referring to the students whose parents opt for them not to attend public schools.”

First, only virtual school in Mass. will be closed

BOSTON GLOBE

3/4/13

(Pop fly)

The state’s first virtual school will shut its digital doors this summer after the Greenfield School Committee voted last week not to submit a proposal to run the Massachusetts Virtual Academy at Greenfield for another year.

The academy opened in 2010 and serves about 470 students in kindergarten through eighth grade from all across the Commonwealth. It will close on June 30, according to committee members.

A new state law, signed in January, which establishes Commonwealth virtual schools, would have required the locally run academy to be overseen by the state, like a charter school.

One of the district’s major objections was that the School Committee would no longer have had direct oversight of the school.

“It would be an autonomous school governed by a separate committee that would not be publicly elected,” said committee member Marcia Day, who voted in favor of not submitting the proposal to the state.

“I really feel like it’s important for public education to be under local control with school committee members who are elected directly.”

The vote, taken last Thursday, was 5-2 in favor of not submitting a proposal.

One dissenting member said she felt the district should have taken more time to consider its options — the state’s deadline for a decision from the district was not until March 25.

“We put a lot of hard work into a new adventure. This wasn’t easy to do,” said committee vice chairwoman Daryl Essensa. “I’m still kind of blown away that we didn’t take just a few more weeks

to try to inform ourselves so that we could make the best decision for Greenfield, for our students, for our employees, for our district.”

Currently, the academy is overseen by the Greenfield School Committee, which partners with K12 Inc., a Virginia company that runs public virtual schools.

According to a spokesman for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Greenfield academy is the only operating virtual school in Massachusetts.

“We are disappointed that Greenfield won’t take advantage of the opportunity to submit an application so the virtual school can continue,” said spokesman JC Considine. “We were confident there were no insurmountable obstacles to Greenfield. It is unfortunate that the School Committee, if it had concerns, did not give us the opportunity to discuss those concerns and work with them.”

Committee members said they were not sure where the school’s students would end up.

“I have no idea,” said Essensa, “and that is a concern.”

Students at the academy communicate with state-certified teachers online, by e-mail, telephone, direct instruction, and monthly outings, according to the school’s website. A parent or other adult serves as the student’s “learning coach.”

The virtual academy was envisioned as an alternative for students who could not attend brick-and-mortar classrooms, including students with medical conditions, those who had issues with bullying, or who were training for competitive arts or sports events.

It has been life-changing for Krysten Callina’s 13-year-old son Seth, who has attended the academy since 2011. Seth has high-functioning Asperger’s syndrome, she said, and while he does fine academically, the academy’s online format was perfect to help him deal with his anxiety and social issues.

“He didn’t need a classroom that was for kids who were more severe,” said Callina, of Somerset. “But the support that he needed was not available in his local school.”

Seth gets his work done quickly in the virtual classroom, she said, which gives him time to work on his social skills. He made one of his best friends through the school, said Callina, and now they go on family vacations together.

“He’s a whole different kid, an entirely different kid,” she said.

But some are happy to see the school go.

“It’s a road to privatizing public education. And it is wrong,” said Greenfield School Committee member Maryelen Calderwood, who voted against submitting the proposal. “Is it wrong for kids to want to supplement their school work with virtual learning? Not at all... But the way it is now is a private corporation making a lot of money on public money, and there’s very little oversight.”

The School Committee vote is final, said Calderwood, and it should not come as a surprise that a virtual school that began as an experiment is closing. The legislation, she said, has been in the works for a year.

Still, those who have found a home at the school will be sorry to see it go. “I’m really sad this could be the end,” said Callina.

Maine Democrats take aim at virtual charter schools

MORNING SENTINEL

1/29/13

(Pop fly)

Five Democratic legislators – including the top-ranking lawmaker and the House co-chair of the education committee – propose either imposing a moratorium on approval of full-time virtual charter schools or banning them altogether.

The push represents a significant challenge to proponents of virtual charter schools, taxpayer-financed institutions through which students receive most or all of their education online, logging on from home computers.

Democrats now control both houses of the Legislature, and several influential legislators are behind the measures.

Senate President Justin Alford, D-Portland, submitted a measure that would forbid creation of both full-time and for-profit virtual charter schools until the state charter school commission can study and report out “best practices” for the schools.

“By creating a moratorium, we could give the charter commission some time and allow them to take a long look at how the state of Maine wants to implement full-time virtual schools,” said Alford, who has previously sponsored bills to promote digital education. “I believe technology belongs in the classroom, but it needs to enhance the classroom, not replace the classroom.”

Rep. Bruce MacDonald, D-Boothbay, has gone further, requesting bills that would prohibit operating virtual schools for profit and require they be run by the state or by existing school districts. “I don’t like the idea that they will be run by out-of-state, for-profit corporations,” MacDonald said.

“I believe that all of these efforts are an attempt to pull apart the enterprise of public education, which I see as building on community and citizenship as well as on knowledge and personal development,” MacDonald added. “It intends to deconstruct all that and send everybody off into their private corner where the only virtue is testable knowledge and all the other learning is let go.”

The state charter school commission this month rejected two virtual charter schools that were to be operated by out-of-state companies K12 Inc. of Herndon, Va., and Connections Learning of Baltimore. The online education companies – the nation’s largest -- were the subject of a Maine Sunday Telegram investigation, published Sept. 2, that showed how they were shaping Maine’s digital education policies and that their schools in other states have fared poorly in studies of student achievement.

Gov. Paul LePage responded to the commission’s rejection of the schools angrily, holding two news conferences in which he called for its members to resign. Both virtual schools are expected to resubmit applications.

The head of the proposed Maine Virtual Academy, which would be operated by K12 Inc., said there will be opposition to the new bills.

“We as a board, and the families who support this option, will oppose such legislation and hope to further educate the Legislature on the benefits a virtual charter school model, and in particular the Maine Virtual Academy, would bring to Maine families and students,” said Amy Carlisle, the school’s board president.

Maine Virtual Academy board secretary Peter Mills said he was surprised to learn of the proposed bills, given that the charter commission already has the authority to scrutinize the virtual schools.

“To have these statutes seems to be overkill and unnecessary because there’s no evidence that the charter commission isn’t doing its work properly or being thoughtful about it,” Mills said.

Maine Republican Party vice chairwoman Ruth Summers, who is president of the rival Maine Connections Academy board, did not respond to an interview request.

In the past two weeks, schools operated by K12 Inc. have been the subject of renewed scrutiny in several states.

- Its 10-year-old Colorado Virtual Academy may lose its charter after authorities there expressed concern about the school’s poor academic performance and the local governing board’s lack of control over the company.
- In Tennessee last week, lawmakers grilled the head of the K12-operated Tennessee Virtual Academy after the school posted substandard test scores.

- The company is also under investigation in Florida over allegations that it covered up the use of uncertified teachers at a school it operates, Florida Virtual Academy.
- Investor lawsuits were filed at a federal court in Virginia last year alleging deceptive enrollment, attendance and recruitment bookkeeping to increase its taxpayer-supported revenues, which are based on the number of students enrolled.

“Virtual schools and their efficacy are in dispute now, so why are we diving into this?” said the sponsor of another moratorium on the schools, Rep. Mick Devin, D-Newcastle.

“We don’t have enough money in our education system in Maine to fund what we’d like to do, so why are we going to funnel all this money out of state?”

Sen. Linda Valentino, D-Saco, has requested a bill that would ban virtual charters, while Rep. Victoria Kornfeld, D-Bangor, has requested one that, like Alfond’s and Devin’s, would impose a moratorium.

Sen. Emily Cain, D-Orono, the former House Democratic leader, has submitted a bill request that would direct the state to study the possibility of running its own virtual school, much as New Hampshire does.

“We have the networks, we have the connections with teachers and school leaders, why wouldn’t it make sense?” Cain said. “Rather than farm out the responsibility for virtual education to a private company, I think it makes sense for the state of Maine to look into whether this really is the best way.”

A spokesperson for Education Commissioner Steve Bowen, who strongly supports virtual charters, did not respond to a request for comment.

All of the requested bills are being drawn up by the Legislature’s revisers, who may recommend some be folded together. Full texts of the bills are expected next week.

MIDWESTERN STATES

Suburban districts spend \$320,800 opposing online charter school plan

DAILY HERALD

6/17/13

(Pop fly)

The appeal process for a proposed suburban virtual charter school was cut short last week — but not before 18 suburban school districts spent more than \$320,800 in legal fees on the issue.

The Illinois Virtual Charter School at Fox River Valley was proposed to serve students in districts from Algonquin to Plainfield. When the school boards serving those communities unanimously rejected the idea, charter applicants appealed to the state charter school commission, furthering districts' legal costs.

The outflow of money would have continued through July had the proposal's backers — Virtual Learning Solutions — not withdrawn their appeals last Monday after the state agreed to a one-year moratorium on the establishment of new virtual charter schools. State charter school commission members officially ended the process Tuesday by accepting the withdrawal. Even so, the price tag for legal bills across the region was significant.

A review of invoices for Geneva School District 304, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, show attorneys billing for time spent researching the charter school issue, participating in phone conferences with administrators, writing and editing resolutions denying the charter application, drafting responses to the applicant's appeal and arguing the appeal process should be put on hold because of the moratorium.

In all, District 304 spent \$34,560 on legal fees associated with the proposal from February to May.

But beyond the financial costs, school district officials are lamenting the effort staff members put into reviewing and later opposing the virtual school plan.

Administrators in all 18 districts spent a significant amount of time preparing questions for public hearings with Virtual Learning Solutions and representatives from their corporate partner, K12 Inc. Most of those questions could not be answered by the applicants.

"They went through the motions of the process at the school board level but really didn't put any effort into that process," said St. Charles District 303 Superintendent Donald Schlomann, adding that school districts had no choice but to take the proposal seriously.

"Efforts on our behalf were something that we needed to do because that's what the law demanded of us," Schlomann said.

Superintendents, communications directors and attorneys from each district met twice as a group over the course of the application process, but officials also had their own work to do. While the proposal was identical for all 18 school districts, boards of education had to vote on it independently, taking into account the unique needs of their student bodies.

In Elgin's Central Unit District 301, Superintendent Todd Stirn said he and staff members spent almost 50 hours on the charter proposal and appeal process. In Oswego, District 308 officials estimated 60 hours of staff time went into the effort.

Kris Monn, assistant superintendent for finance in the Batavia School District 101, said the entire senior management team spent at least a day reviewing the original proposal, administrators went to public hearings outside of Batavia to gather more information and Superintendent Jack Barshinger spent three days in Springfield lobbying for the one-year moratorium. He also went to Chicago for the May 15 state charter school commission hearing.

Exasperated school officials across the region say district staffers could have been spending their time in better ways.

Michael Bregy, superintendent of Community Unit District 300, said the focus on the proposed charter school kept his administrative team from working on the district's strategic plan. That project has been delayed to this summer.

What's more, Bregy said, the trips to Springfield and Chicago kept administrators from high profile end-of-year events in their communities.

"You can't put a price tag on being in your own school district with your own kids," Bregy said.

Now suburban educators will have almost a year before a similar proposal could come forward again — and few doubt one will.

Ted Dabrowski, who became president of Virtual Learning Solutions when Sharnell Jackson resigned last month, said he hopes the parameters for creating a virtual school are clarified during the moratorium. He did not deny the possibility of his own group applying for another charter once more specific guidelines are set.

The state charter school commission has been tasked by legislators with researching virtual schooling outcomes and costs, among other topics. An advisory council will take shape by Aug. 1 to start the project. They must submit a report to the legislature by March 1, a month before the moratorium ends.

As suburban educators breathed a collective sigh of relief last week, Bregy pointed to the win in Springfield as a good lesson that came out of the five-month proposal process.

"It did make a difference that we came together," Bregy said, referring to successful lobbying for the moratorium. He said he hopes the experience inspires districts across the region.

"I don't believe the state has ever seen such unification before with 18 school districts — 18 large school districts," Bregy said. "I hope this is the start of a new beginning."

District 62 approves 3-year goals

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

4/16/13

(Pop fly)

Des Plaines School District 62 may be busy for the foreseeable future after it passed sweeping education goals Monday, but it is well on pace to achieving its goals in the digital area, district officials said Monday.

The board approved four goals submitted by Superintendent Jane Westerhold. While specific plans are yet to be developed, implementation is to begin in July, with a planned completion date of June 30, 2016.

The board spent most of its time talking about plans to complete what it calls a digital conversion spanning all grades. The plan would ensure that students experience 21st-century methodologies through digital delivery of content and developing digital literacy skills to be ready for high school, college, career and life, according to Westerhold.

Complementing the digital conversion goal was an update on technology by Seth Bowers, director of information and instructional technology.

Bowers explained that in 2008, the district's Programs and Services Committee made several recommendations categorized as "must haves," "should haves" and "nice to haves."

"You can take a red marker and cross out all the 'must haves' and 'should haves,' because we've accomplished those," Bowers said.

Included on the "must have" list were mounted LCD screens, full wireless access, installation of infrastructure and ports, adequate black-and-white printers and color print options, and full technology support at all district buildings.

Rounding out the "should have" category were schoolwide intercom systems, a video distribution system, and laptops for students and teachers. On the "nice to have" list were interactive whiteboards and document cameras, which are in some but not all classrooms, Bowers said.

There are currently 4,100 online devices at District 62 schools and 4,800 students, Bowers said. That's a twofold increase from 2008, when the district had slightly fewer than under 2000 devices, he said.

In addition, Westerhold said the district is "blessed to have wireless access in every building and is in a great position to move forward."

Citing the fact that some of the district's students come from poor households, Westerhold said, technology can offer a lot of opportunities.

"We have a lot of kids who haven't seen a lot of things," she said. "When we open them up to the digital world, they can go to a lot of places."

Westerhold explained that while students cannot take the devices home, a committee will be formed in July to develop a plan that would likely create a 1:1 ratio of online devices to students. The committee will focus on specifics such as cost, what type of devices the district will select and how it will roll out its plan, Westerhold said.

Among the other goals in Westerhold's plan approved by the board are the implementation of anti-bullying curricula in all schools; evaluation of school safety and security; development of a multiyear facilities plan; updating a plan for hiring teachers and administrators; digital report cards, parental portal communication and digital registration; keeping fund balances in alignment with board of education policies; keeping a positive bond rating; seeking new sources of revenue; and allocating resources for increased bandwidth.

Also, Ellen Teelucksingh, the new assistant superintendent for student services, was introduced to the board. Effective July 1, Teelucksingh is replacing Brad Voehringer, who was recently hired to lead Pennoyer School District 79 in Norridge.

Safety not only reason why parents pick virtual schools

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

2/11/13

(Pop fly)

An attack on an elementary school in Connecticut led a Pennsylvania mother to transfer her two sons into a cyber school so they could take all their classes at home on a computer.

The mother who moved her boys into Achievement House, a cyber charter school based in Exton, Chester County, probably worried about safety before a gunman killed 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., the school's spokeswoman said.

"When something like that happened, it was probably the last straw," Lynn Rodden, director of communications at Achievement House, said.

Teaching children at home is one way to protect them from violence at school.

The example from Achievement House notwithstanding, administrators don't think students will flock to cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania because of the shootings in Connecticut.

Michele Medek, coordinator of the Hazleton Area Virtual Academy that has approximately 100 students, said she received a couple calls from parents after the shootings. Their children decided to stay in Hazleton Area High School rather than transfer to the cyber school, which the school district also operates, Medek said.

More generally, administrators said parents and students consider safety, including bullying, along with other factors when deciding between a school and a cyber school.

Gene Glass, who has written about cyber charter schools as a senior researcher for the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado in Boulder, doesn't expect their enrollments to surge because of the shootings.

"Nor do I suspect that people will give up attending movie theaters because of James Holmes," Glass said of the man accused in a mass shooting that killed 12 and wounded 58 in a theater in Aurora, Colo., on July 20, 2012.

Shootings like those in Newtown on Dec. 14, 2012, or the wounding of a 14-year-old student at a middle school in Atlanta on Jan. 31 are rare.

The chance of a student being murdered or committing suicide at school was one in 2.7 million during the 2009-10 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics reported.

That year, 17 students were murdered and one committed suicide at school.

Homicides at school have represented less than 2 percent of all homicides for children ages 5 to 18 during the 14 years that the center has compiled the "Indicators of School Crime and Safety" survey.

"Kids are much safer in schools than in a car," Penn State education professor Alison Carr-Chellman said.

Carr-Chellman said enrolling students in cyber schools would spare them from the relative danger of riding a school bus and let them avoid the nuisances of catching colds and flu that spread through schools.

Cyber charter schools are catching on for a host of reasons - such as removing students from dangerous situations and allowing them to train for specialties in which they excel, such as ballet or Olympic sports.

In 2003, American students could select from 60 schools in 13 states.

Six years later, the tally grew to 95 schools in 26 states, an article in *The Charter Schools Resource Journal* for the winter of 2011 said.

Pennsylvania, one of the first states to permit cyber charters, now has 16 schools in which 33,262 students are enrolled this year.

On Jan. 28, the state Department of Education rejected the applications for eight charter schools that wanted to open next year. In the applications, reviewers found deficiencies, including out-of-date background checks and insufficient safeguards against plagiarism. Board members for the schools, which are nonprofit entities, also held posts with companies that had business ties to the schools.

State reviewers said applications that proposed educating students partly in tutoring centers and partly at home blurred the line between cyber schools and schools with classrooms.

Carr-Chellman said parents should consider the roles they will have to play if they move their children into cyber charter schools. Typically at least one parent has to stay home to assist a child in cyber school.

Also, she recommends looking at the ratio of students to teachers in cyber charter schools, which may use lower-paid tutors to supplement teachers.

Carr-Chellman also studies the economics of cyber schools. State aid moves from public schools with each student who transfers to a cyber school. While the schools operate as nonprofit organizations, they could have ties to companies that sell curriculum materials to the schools and pay top executives seven-figure salaries.

“That deeply worries me,” Carr-Chellman said of the profit motive hidden in some cyber charter schools.

Lawmakers in Pennsylvania are studying whether cyber schools cost less to operate than brick-and-mortar schools and whether they should receive less state aid per student.

Maurice Flurie III, administrator of the Commonwealth Connection Academy in Harrisburg, said his cyber charter school works with companies that supply and deliver equipment and materials. But regular schools have contracts with companies such as textbook publishers and cafeteria managers, he said.

“It’s more effective to me to (enlist) a company that has expertise than to invent this from scratch. I see it as a cost savings,” Flurie said.

Flurie said parents and students transfer to cyber schools for various reasons, such as the sense that traditional schools aren’t meeting their needs.

“Many parents comment that they feel schools aren’t listening. They find one refreshing thing is (that) we ask them how their child learns. They feel like they are partners,” he said.

Parents can tailor curriculums at cyber schools for children with special needs or for children who want to learn more than their classes offered elsewhere.

Students emancipated from their parents might choose cyber schools to fit classes around jobs that they hold to support themselves. Students who excel as actors, dancers and athletes also opt for cyber schooling.

Medical conditions from pregnancy to weakened immune systems lead some students to study online from home rather than inside a classroom.

“Bullying is No. 1 of all reasons” why students enroll at the 21st Century Cyber Charter School in Exton, the school’s administrator, Jon Marsh, said.

When Marsh learned of the shootings in Newtown, he expected enrollment would surge.

That didn’t happen, but for the start of the winter term, when 50 to 60 students typically join, 90 signed up this year.

He doesn’t know of any who specifically enrolled because of the shootings.

Karin Shipman of the Susq-Cyber Charter School in Bloomsburg said fear changes attitudes about schools.

“While I think most reports show traditional schools are very safe, fear is a driving factor. Rather than take that one-in-whatever-million chance that is there, there are individuals” who enroll in cyber charter schools, she said.

Susq-Cyber Charter School opened a decade ago and has maintained a steady enrollment of 170, drawn primarily from surrounding counties.

Richard Hazler, the professor in charge of educating counselors at Penn State University, considers perceptions of students schooled through their home computers.

“It does create for that child, perhaps, a sense of safety in the home, but also a sense that the outside world is too dangerous,” Hazler said.

He framed the tragedy at Newtown like this: “More students are harmed in all kinds of ways in the home than they are in school ... These kinds of things can happen anywhere - in the mall. They can happen on the street.”

Many mass shootings are prevented - although those stories don't make news - because someone reaches out to a person who might otherwise have pulled a trigger, Hazler said.

He said society will become safer if people become better bystanders, by interceding with someone who is isolated.

“You don't need to be a counselor. You don't need to be a therapist to sit with that person. Don't let them be alone. Eventually, they'll wind up talking to you,” he said. “The child who is isolated and has somebody befriend them (that) makes a huge difference ... Hopefully, they'll begin to see things differently.”

WESTERN STATES

Online schools a virtual reality in Sacramento

SACRAMENTO NEWS & REVIEW

5/9/13

(Strike out)

When Kelly Krug's son Ben struggled academically, the Fair Oaks mom looked for options that provided computerized instruction.

Called “virtual schools,” these new classrooms allow students to learn course work entirely via online methods. Krug enrolled Ben, and he thrived — but a new study on virtual schools says that his success story is an exception to the rule.

An 80-page national report released last week on full-time virtual schools found problems with student performance and also a lack of oversight of public dollars spent on this brave new cyber world.

Some private virtual-school companies operating here in Sacramento have grown enrollment by more than 20 percent annually over the past several years. This means that tens of millions of taxpayer dollars go toward these new online classrooms, which has some critics worried.

“[There's] lagging performance [and] lots of taxpayer money at stake, and very little solid evidence to justify the rapid expansion of virtual schools,” said University of Colorado at Boulder professor Alex Molnar, who edited the new National Education Policy Center study.

His report shows that virtual schools trail traditional brick-and-mortars in performance and graduation rates.

“In the 2010-2011 school year, for instance, 52 percent of brick-and-mortar district and charter schools met AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress, the federal government’s measurement for student development based on standardized tests], contrasted with 23.6 percent of virtual schools.”

Despite the scathing study, some local parents give rave reviews to online schools.

Kelly Smith of Elk Grove likes the pace at which Logan, her 8-year-old son, learns in the Elk Grove Unified School District’s Virtual Academy. This is his third year in the program.

Miriam Lyons, with 25 years of classroom teaching experience, is one of three teachers at Elk Grove’s program, a hybrid model of online and classroom education that opened three years ago. The Virtual Academy enrolls 66 students, grades K-8, who get in-person tutoring weekly in addition to online course work.

“We just finished up an algebra workshop,” said Lyons, adding that “you can’t really learn that subject online.”

This Elk Grove classroom is part of the nation’s largest virtual-school outfit, K12 Inc., based out of Virginia. The publicly traded, for-profit firm operates in all 50 states and also 85 countries, according to a recent company statement.

K12 gets the full dollar amount of public funding for each student enrolled, according to Gary Miron, an education professor at Western Michigan University and co-author of the new NEPC study.

He says the problem is that K12 is accountable to shareholders, not taxpayers. Which is why his new study also recommends more research into and oversight of online schools.

State agencies need more and better data, according to the report’s authors, especially when it comes to tracking public money that flows to private online schools.

SN&R contacted the California Department of Education for data on virtual-school funding, but according to the CDE’s School Fiscal Services Division, it does not collect information on how virtual schools calculate student attendance or the amount of state tax dollars companies receive.

In the meantime, ads for online schools continue to lure new students, as the NEPC study describes.

A radio commercial on K12 Inc. is what caught the attention of Krug, as her eldest son struggled in fourth grade.

“His reading and math skills were falling further and further behind level,” she said. The family had searched for a school to meet his specific needs. They observed and researched private and public charter and traditional options.

“We wanted to ensure that he would catch up in his problem areas,” Krug said. Ben blossomed in the K12 learning environment, according to his mother.

The key to K12’s online-learning approach, Krug said, is that it requires students to master skills in lessons and assessments before advancing. She is now also a K12 middle-school teacher and teacher trainer.

Krug’s youngest son, Sam, has been attending the California Virtual Academies, a tuition-free and virtual public charter school, since first grade.

According to K12, its 13 CAVAs statewide have grown on average at a rate of 20 percent annually since 2008.

In California, there were 33 full-time virtual schools serving 18,350 students in 2011-12; nationally, there are more than 200,000 elementary and secondary students in 39 states and the District of Columbia, according to the NEPC study. The state’s overall number of public-school students was 6.2 million in 2009-10.

SN&R asked for the amount of tax dollars CAVA receives for its students but was unable to obtain said number. If K12 receives an average of \$5,000 in state funding per student each year, the annual sum of taxpayer monies received could be upward of \$70 million.

The NEPC study urges no further growth of full-time virtual schools now, as their backers, focused on private profit, “are several years ahead of policymakers and researchers.”

N.M. Senate approves online charter school moratorium

NEW MEXICO NEWS

2/28/13

(Pop fly)

New Mexico would impose a temporary moratorium on new fully online charter schools under a proposal approved by the Senate.

The measure by Republican Sen. Gay Kernan of Hobbs calls for a one-year moratorium to allow a study of virtual charter schools to assess their effects on students and public schools.

A statewide online charter school opened last year and was authorized by the Farmington school district. Public Education Secretary Hanna Skandera recently approved a new online charter school, which is to open in the fall.

Critics object to the online schools contracting with out-of-state, for-profit companies for their classes, and Democratic legislators have asked Attorney General Gary King to investigate the arrangements.

The Senate approved the legislation on a 32-7 vote on Wednesday, sending it to the House.

SOUTHERN STATES

State to vote on proposal for online charter schools

CHARLOTTE NEWS & OBSERVER

1/91/13

(Pop fly)

North Carolina children as young as 5 may soon be able to receive their public school education online from for-profit companies.

The State Board of Education plans to vote Thursday on a special application for virtual schools that want to run public charters and receive taxpayer money.

The board may consider charters that could sign up students statewide – though local school districts are worried about having to share funds with the online schools.

Virtual charters operate throughout the country, and companies are eager to gain a toehold in North Carolina. Representatives of at least two companies notified the state they want to begin enrolling North Carolina students in online charters in 2014.

The move to consider virtual charters for approval alongside applications for brick-and-mortar schools comes after months of controversy over a lawsuit brought by N.C. Learns, a nonprofit that wants to bring to the state an online school managed by K12, the nation's biggest for-profit selling online education. The charter proposed to enroll as many as 6,526 students from kindergarten through high school statewide.

After the state board last year refused to consider the charter application, N.C. Learns appealed. Dozens of school boards from around the state united to persuade a Wake Superior Court judge to prevent the online school from opening last fall. School board members said then that they weren't prepared to consider requests for online schools. The vote Thursday would give virtual school operators a way for their startup proposals to get a hearing.

State Board of Education Chairman Bill Harrison has been critical of K12 in the past. National newspapers have written critically of the company, and the Florida Department of Education launched an investigation into the company last year on the suspicion that it was violating state law by using uncertified teachers.

N.C. Learns is appealing the Superior Court ruling and has informed the state Department of Public Instruction that it intends to apply again.

Sen. Fletcher Hartsell, a lawyer who represents N.C. Learns, did not return calls, and a call to K12's national office in Virginia was not returned.

Harrison said he supports virtual schools, but has concerns about transparency with online companies. The state runs an online school, the N.C. Virtual Public School, that allows high school students to take courses, but it is not open to elementary school students. Courses open to middle school students are limited.

The state board still has concerns about the funding of online charters that it did not address. Virtual charters will receive money according to the same formula that funds all charter schools, even though the virtual schools don't have to open and maintain buildings. Charter schools receive public money for students, but not for buildings.

Any changes in store for virtual charter funding would have to come from the legislature, Harrison said.

Leanne Winner, lobbyist for the N.C. School Boards Association, said opening the state to online charter schools would be a bad idea without first answering those funding questions. There should be "a close examination of cost and whether they should be getting the same dollars," she said.

Bryan Setser, former executive director of the N.C. Virtual Public School, wants to help start a statewide online charter using a company called Connections Academy. Setser said he's been impressed by Connections and the work it does with parents and students.

"Unfortunately, it's always about corporations, 'bad,' and public schools, 'good,' and that's not the right discussion," he said.

Setser said the state school board's approach to virtual charters is standing in the way of innovation. "You've got to provide opportunities for charters to distinguish themselves," he said. "It still feels very much like a traditional school application. The environments we're moving into are not traditional."

Charter school proponents to try again next session

MISSISSIPPI BUSINESS JOURNAL

1/7/2013

(Pop fly)

A year ago, even some opponents of charter schools expected a bill to pass. But some majority Republicans balked, killing the bill in the House.

So proponents redoubled their efforts, trying to build support for widening the rules that allow alternative public schools run by outside groups. Now they will try again.

“I believe a large majority of Mississippians support public charter schools, and I think an overwhelming majority of Republican Party voters support charter schools,” said Republican Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, who has been among the lead proponents for changes in school structure. Gov. Phil Bryant and House Speaker Philip Gunn — both Republicans — also back charters.

“It’s not going to be the end-all, save-all, every child that’s failing won’t have to worry now, charter schools are here,” Bryant said. “But it will be a help. And I think anything that can help, we need to explore.”

But opponents still fear that charter schools will skim money and top students from traditional schools that can’t afford to lose either.

The idea behind charter schools is that new managers promise high academic performance in exchange for freedom from many rules governing regular public schools.

Current Mississippi law doesn’t contemplate new charter schools, only conversions of existing schools that don’t meet state standards for three consecutive years. A total of 35 of the state’s 1,000-plus schools are eligible to be converted to charters this year, but only if a majority of parents petition and win approval from the state Board of Education.

Leaders of the House and Senate education committees are drafting bills that would expand charter schools. The measures would allow creation of entirely new schools in addition to takeover of existing schools. A new board would approve charter applications, oversee schools and have authority to close those that fail to perform.

There are three main issues in dispute. That new board is the first. The state Board of Education wants to be the authorizing body for charters, but proponents say new schools need a boss that won’t be biased in favor of the existing system.

“We don’t want the same leadership that has brought us to the place we’re at now,” said House Education Committee Chairman John Moore, R-Brandon.

The second clash is over allowing all-online and for-profit schools. Some groups oppose online, or “virtual” schools, especially those run by for-profit companies, saying they have poor track records.

“It appears that what some are framing as ‘school reform’ is really an effort to push through a for-profit agenda rather than enact what has been proven to advance student achievement,” Nancy Loome, executive director of The Parents Campaign, wrote in an email to supporters Thursday.

The group supports the charter concept but strongly opposes virtual schools or involvement of for-profit operators.

Bills now being drafted would allow three statewide virtual schools, according to Moore and Senate Education Chairman Gray Tollison, R-Oxford. Nonprofit charter schools would be permitted, but Moore and Tollison said charters should be allowed to hire private contractors just as public schools do. A charter review board would be the focal point for screening out bad proposals.

The biggest conflict is whether local districts should be able to block charter schools in their areas. Tollison and Moore said their measures would allow local boards in A-rated and B-rated districts — now 50 districts — to block charters. What’s unclear is whether the state’s 42 C-rated districts would have the same power. Last year, Reeves pushed provisions that would not give C districts veto power, but some House Republicans wanted C districts to have such authority.

The state began rating the achievement of schools and school districts on an A-F scale this year, replacing an older seven-step scale ranging from “star” to “failing.”

Gunn bumped charter opponent Linda Whittington, D-Schlater, off the education panel and replaced her with charter supporter Charles Busby, R-Pascagoula. That could give charter supporters in the House more room to maneuver. But even if the final version of the legislation had made it out of committee last year, Moore said he thinks one or two votes would have decided the issue. Opponents claimed the bill would have failed.

Now, Moore believes there is more support in the House.

House Committee Kills Bill Targeting For-Profit School

WTVF NEWS

2/12/13

(Pop fly)

A bill that would shut down a controversial online public school died Tuesday afternoon in a House subcommittee. The Tennessee Virtual Academy is operated by the for-profit K-12 corporation, and it was just the subject of a NewsChannel 5 investigation into possible grade fixing.

But the Republican-controlled committee clearly sympathetic to K-12. Not a single member of the committee asked about the grade-fixing allegations. Instead, the chairman called on one of the school’s teachers before the bill ever came up for debate.

“I know that you’re looking at test scores, but we need time for improvement,” teacher Summer Shelton told the committee. “And you’re exactly right. We do want to have the best for our children, but we want to have options.”

Shelton was one of a large contingent of teachers and parents from the Virtual Academy who packed the legislative hearing room.

Democrat Rep. Mike Stewart of Nashville argued that the for-profit school should be closed because its standardized test scores so far have put it among the worst schools in the state.

Adding to the concerns, he argued, is the December email just obtained by NewsChannel 5 Investigates.

Sent to middle school teachers, it told them that “after... looking at so many failing grades, we need to make some changes before the holidays.”

It essentially changed how grades were calculated.

“What about the internal emails that were revealed last night on Channel 5, suggesting that there is a policy of grade changing within K12 Inc.?” Stewart asked.

“I think what we see here is evidence that they are trying to game the system by having teachers change grades.”

Right after Stewart began to push on that issue, the committee cut off debate.

His bill died in a lopsided vote.

Charter, voucher, online schools campaigning for bigger role in Florida

PALM BEACH POST

1/1/2013

(Pop fly)

Charter school, voucher and online education companies poured more than \$2 million into this fall's political campaigns, primarily those of Republicans who are again demanding more alternatives to traditional public schools.

But opponents also are digging in, led by the state's largest teachers union, which spent \$3.9 million on campaigns.

A deeply ideological battle is expected to unfold at Florida's Capitol in coming months, with vast amounts of taxpayer dollars at stake. Republican Gov. Rick Scott's own political future also may be in play.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush, talked of as a future GOP presidential contender, has emerged as chief cheerleader for the industry that flourished during his eight years as Florida governor and still helps finance a nationwide education policy think tank he leads.

“If you believe, like I do, that we need to move this ball down the field far faster, charter schools, vouchers, all sorts of alternatives... are part of the answer,” Bush said in November at his Foundation for Excellence in Education national conference in Washington.

“But once again, there will be massive pushback,” warned Bush, a fierce opponent of teachers unions.

In Florida, a blueprint for expanding alternate education on several levels already is being rolled out.

Scott is promoting changes to expand enrollment in charter schools.

House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, has promoted creation of an online university in Florida, a concept now being studied by state university officials, while he also has created a new education Choice and Innovation Subcommittee charged with exploring more charter-, virtual- and home-school options.

The panel’s chairman, Rep. Michael Bileca, R-Miami, sponsored legislation last year aimed at letting parents in low-performing schools call for a private-management company to take over.

The “parent trigger” bill died on a 20-20 vote in the Senate. But it’s likely to resurface this year.

Another benchmark was the selection last month of Education Commissioner Tony Bennett, who adheres to Bush and Scott’s approach to what supporters call parental choice. Bennett is

Florida’s third education commissioner in two years.

Bennett, though, was turned out in November by voters as Indiana’s superintendent of public instruction after clashing with teachers unions over voucher, teacher evaluation and school grading policies, similar to those enacted in Florida during the Bush years.

“Sometimes, it seems that Bush is still the manager of all that’s still going on in Florida,” said Andy Ford, president of the Florida Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union.

“These policies are part of his political past. But now they also could affect how credible he is in the future,” Ford added.

The union and several parent groups say the hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars that go to charter schools, online efforts and to the state’s tax credit scholarship program started under Bush merely redirect money to private and often for-profit interests that could, instead, be used to improve public schools.

But for those promoting more education overhaul, Florida is seen as fertile ground.

Many of Florida's Republican leaders came of political age under Bush. The charter, online and voucher industry also have become a steady source of major campaign dollars, mostly for Republican candidates, according to state records reviewed by The Palm Beach Post.

Charter Schools USA gave \$215,450 during the last campaign, most of it going to the Florida Republican Party and the Florida Federation for Children, a political spending committee chaired by John Kirtley, who helped create the state's program that gives corporations tax credits for money they contribute to education vouchers for low-income students to attend private schools, including religious ones.

Scott spoke in December at a dinner honoring the corporate tax-credit scholarship program, which now serves more than 50,000 students and receives \$229 million from corporations that otherwise would have gone to state taxes.

Under legislation sponsored by Weatherford two years ago, before he was House speaker, the credit is set to grow to \$286 million next year.

For directing the program, Kirtley's organization, Step Up for Students, receives 3 percent for management fees this year, or almost \$6.9 million.

Charter Schools USA, based in Fort Lauderdale, sees a benefit in supporting candidates and committees that share similar values. It operates 48 charter schools in Florida and four other states, including Renaissance Charter School in West Palm Beach.

"We're really focused on those who support our schools," said Colleen Reynolds, Charter Schools' spokeswoman. "The campaign contributions are just designed to help promote parental choice."

Kirtley's committee spent almost \$1.5 million on last fall's campaigns; the Apollo Group, owners of the online University of Phoenix, gave \$120,500, mostly to the Florida GOP and leadership committees.

Academica Management, a Miami-based charter school company, spent \$100,000 last fall, while its construction unit, School Development LLC, gave \$138,000, including \$60,000 to the Florida Republican Party.

Also mostly helping Republican candidates were a host of alternate education advocates, including the Florida Association of Public Charter Schools, \$35,000; Community Education Partners, \$15,000; Daytona Education Associates, \$9,500; Connections Academy of Baltimore, Md., \$6,500; and online Argosy University of Pittsburgh, which spent \$11,900.

The teachers union also is no slouch in political spending. But Ford describes the effort as "mostly defensive."

The Florida Education Association spent almost \$1.4 million during the last election season, while its associated Public Education Defense Fund spent another \$2.5 million, records show. The bulk of it went to Democratic candidates and allied causes, such as the effort to defeat Amendment 8, which some saw as an attempt to revive vouchers to send students from failed public schools to private schools, including religious ones.

The FEA heavily backed Scott's 2010 opponent, Democrat Alex Sink, and is close to former Republican Gov. Charlie Crist, who last month switched parties to become a Democrat and is widely seen as a potential Scott re-election rival in two years.

How the debate over alternate education unspools could provide plenty of grist for the upcoming governor's race.

Among the nontraditional education programs, charter schools have been around the longest in Florida – and could be in line for the sharpest upgrade when Florida lawmakers convene in March.

Charter schools are publicly funded, nonsectarian schools that operate under a contract, or charter, with local school boards. A governing board, appointed or selected, manages them, with many schools focused on accepting low-performing students.

Charter schools are funded like other public schools in Florida – receiving taxpayer dollars based on the number of full-time students enrolled, but are exempt from many regulations governing public schools, although their students must take the FCAT, which is not required of voucher students.

Scott has called next year for removing enrollment caps from charter schools – making the already lucrative industry even stronger.

There are 575 charter schools operating in Florida this year – more than double the number existing a decade ago. Palm Beach County has 41 charter schools, up from 35 last year.

More than 180,000 of Florida's 2.6 million students go to charter schools. In Palm Beach County, 11,000 out of 177,000 county students attend charters.

Advocates say more than 30,000 students are on waiting lists for top charter schools. But many also have come under fire for poor performance, or putting public dollars into fat administrative salaries.

The U.S. Department of Education this fall also cited Florida, California and Arizona for lax monitoring of how charter schools spend their money and whether it complies with federal regulations, criticism disputed by state education officials.

Asked last month whether he felt charter schools and other education alternatives should be on equal footing as traditional schools, Scott gave a nuanced answer.

“I believe we ought to have choice, I believe we ought to have accountability, I believe parents ought to have options and I believe competition works,” Scott told reporters after a Cabinet meeting. “I want to make sure traditional public schools do well... I just want our kids to get a great education.”

Legislation further undermines Florida’s public school system

BRADENTON HERALD

5/13/13

(Strike out)

Florida’s relentless drive to privatize public education scored another victory on the final day of the Legislature’s session when Republicans approved the expenditure of public school funds on classes offered by online learning companies.

While applauding the measure as a win for school choice, GOP lawmakers conveniently ignored troublesome aspects to privatization.

A virtual learning company, K12 Inc., has contracts with 43 of the state’s 67 school districts, including Manatee and Sarasota. Last year, the Florida Center for Investigative Reporting discovered the company employed teachers without proper certifications and then asked workers to cover up the fraudulent practice.

The draft report of an investigation by the Florida Department of Education’s Inspector General confirmed that K12, the nation’s largest operator of online schools, employed three instructors who lacked proper state certification to teach some subjects.

The new legislation not only expands privatization -- currently, a small number of private companies hold FDOE authorization to offer online courses -- provisions allow companies to circumvent part of the vetting process to gain approval on a trial basis. That represents another unsettling element to this measure.

K12, which contributed \$21,000 to GOP candidates and another \$25,000 to the Republican Party of Florida ahead of the last election, and other private online learning companies have been lobbying the Legislature hard for greater access to public funds.

Legislation also reduces the per-student allocation for Florida Virtual School, the public entity that has been expanding exponentially as the state transitions toward a greater reliance on virtual education. Students completed 116,000 FLVS courses during the 2007-2008 academic year, and the total ballooned to 315,000 in 2011-2012.

But per-pupil funding plummeted over the past four years from a high of \$6,500 in 2007-2008 to \$4,800 last year. Another 14 percent reduction is expected under this new legislation. FLVS had expected a budget increase of \$45 million but now anticipates only an additional \$9 million, which will force the virtual school to increase the teacher-to-student ratio to handle 80,000 new enrollments.

Online learning will become more prevalent in the future, too. Starting with the 2014-2015 academic year, all statewide end-of-course tests will be administered via the web.

This year, another segment of the privatization of education became embroiled in scandalous disclosures of fraud and loose oversight. Last year the Legislature voted to continue funding private tutoring after the federal government eased regulations requiring private instruction for poor children in Florida's worst schools.

But a Tampa Bay Times investigation found the program had sent public funds to criminals operating tutoring companies and even let companies accused of fraud to remain associated with school districts. Lax state oversight should not be tolerated in any program.

Even as subsidized tutoring came under fire during the recent session, several lawmakers with connections to the industry attempted to insert language in a virtual education bill that would have allocated \$80 million in federal education money to private instruction companies. The amendment duly failed.

But this episode illustrates the lengths to which certain legislators will go to advance privatization, sometimes under self-serving circumstances and even with a program mired in scandal. There is little shame in Tallahassee.

The online education bill undermines Florida Virtual School in favor of the enrichment of private enterprise at taxpayer expense. While Gov. Rick Scott has yet to sign this legislation, that's a forgone conclusion given his general support for privatization.

Education should be in the public realm — held answerable to stakeholders, not stockholders.

APPENDIX F

STATE SAMPLING, HIGHLY RATED ARTICLES

Note: Sections bolded in green show why each article was rated highly. The phrase in parentheses is how our analysts scored in The Media Bullpen© scored the story. Using baseball language, articles could be given a score of home run, triple, double, single, pop fly or strike out, with home run being the best and strike out being the worst. For more information, please go to <http://www.mediabullpen.com/scores>

NORTHEASTERN STATES

Cerf pulls plug on online charter schools

NEW JERSEY SPOTLIGHT

6/5/13

(Triple)

Growing opposition to virtual charters, legal challenges and gray areas help inform commissioner's decision.

State Education Commissioner Chris Cerf yesterday told the organizers of two proposed online charter schools that he would not grant them the final approval needed to open next fall.

The decision comes as something of a surprise.

A year ago the two charters — a K-12 school in Newark and a high school for dropouts in Monmouth and Ocean Counties — appeared poised to become the state's first all-online programs. Both had received preliminary approval from the Christie administration.

But support slowly wilted over the past year, as community and political opposition mounted. And K12 Inc., the nation's largest online education firm, was connected with both charter applications as well, prompting debate over the for-profit company's role.

The Legislature held a handful of hearings on the topic, and the state's dominant teachers union — the New Jersey Education Association — has filed a challenge in court.

In the face of the growing disapproval, Cerf hedged in his support as well. He postponed awarding the final charters this past summer and has said little on the subject since then, before disclosing his final decision yesterday.

In the letters to the schools yesterday, Cerf cited the many uncertainties about both their legal standing and the effectiveness of online education. The state's charter school law has no provisions for virtual learning, not surprising given that the measure is 17 years old.

“Uncertainty about the legal foundations for fully virtual charter schools and the Department's serious concerns regarding its ability to effectively oversee such schools precludes the Department from granting... a final charter,” Cerf wrote to one of the schools.

The schools aren't going down without complaint. The leaders of the New Jersey Virtual Academy Charter School, which would be operated out of Newark by K12, immediately released a letter to Cerf outlining their concerns over first being postponed a year ago and then rejected outright.

“We now find ourselves in the position of having to tell 850 children, their families, and the teachers your staff insisted we hire as part of the compliance process that, once again, the school will be denied the opportunity to open and prove ourselves,” read the letter from Michael Pallante, chairman of the proposed school's board.

“Not once during all of the hearings, trainings, demonstration sessions, e-mail, and telephone conversations were we ever told that this was going to happen to us and to these families once again,” he said.

The school noted that it had also hired experts to speak to the legality and effectiveness of the programs. K12 also signed on with the state's top lobbying firm, Princeton Public Affairs Group.

Pallante did not say if the school would appeal the decision, but indicated that it would at least push for reconsideration.

“Commissioner, we request a meeting with you as soon as possible and at the same time ask that you reconsider your decision,” Pallante wrote.

“We have done everything asked of us, we have been a good partner, and we have done these things because deep down we believed that you and Gov. Christie were champions of parental choice and would stand up for New Jersey families over the objections of the NJEA and other critics,” he continued.

The other rejected school, which was to be operated out of the Monmouth-Ocean Educational Services Commission, had been on shakier ground, and its founder said he was likely to withdraw the application. The program was intended to serve potential dropouts in four communities, but had difficulties in signing up the required numbers.

Tim Nogueira, the district's superintendent, said the enrollment problems and difficulties in meeting the state's requirements “were just too much to overcome.” He said the state had plenty of

time putting in place the required regulations and other guidelines to help schools like his, but did not appear intent on doing so.

“It is obvious that New Jersey is not a pro-online state, and is already well behind in this,” he said. “That’s unfortunate.”

Critics applauded Cerf’s decision, saying he must have heard the many concerns about both the effectiveness and the potential profits of the programs.

“This would have been a disaster for taxpayers and a disaster for children, and we are happy that he did the right thing,” said Julia Sass Rubin, a spokeswoman for Save Our Schools New Jersey, a pro-public school group.

“We hope that he will continue to make the right decision,” she said. Steve Wollmer, the NJEA’s communications director, said it was “an experiment we don’t need to take in New Jersey.”

“We’re pleased with the decision,” he said. “From an education and policy perspective, it’s the right one.” Cerf had faced off on the topic with state Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen) just the day before at a legislative hearing on Gov. Chris Christie’s budget. Weinberg had been one of the online schools’ biggest critics, backing one bill that would have placed a moratorium on such models.

Cerf hinted at his decision to come, and Weinberg said she would be ready for it if he gave the schools the go-ahead.

“I’ll give you fair warning,” Weinberg said. “This is not a great way to educate children, and this is a very risky field that we are getting into.”

Distance learning at the fingertips

CAPE COD TIMES

5/20/13

(Triple)

On a recent Monday in the online learning classroom at Nauset Regional High School, Parker Lang, 14, of Brewster designed a video game while 16-year-old sophomore Abby Bausch prepared for an MCAS science test.

As a teacher’s voice filled her ear phones with information about parasitism, Bausch watched a circle highlight crucial information on her computer screen.

There was a place for her to type e-notes that the school’s online coordinator, Chris Grozier, can print out for her.

“It’s really helpful for MCAS,” Bausch said. “It helps with my science class, too.”

The Brewster teen is one of hundreds of Cape and Islands high school students taking online courses to prepare for tests, recover credits, squeeze in extra AP courses or take an interesting class not offered by their high school.

At Nauset Regional High School, 84 students — including 16 night-school students — are taking at least one course in the school’s virtual classroom program, which debuted in September.

Students have taken courses in gaming design, 3D art and an introduction to programming apps, said Chris Grozier, coordinator of Edgenuity, the online program the school is using.

“It’s a very ‘go at your own pace’ kind of program,” special education teacher Teal Tobler said.

Tobler said she likes the way she can customize credit recovery and test preparation courses for students by removing sections they already mastered to concentrate on new material or areas where students have struggled.

Students like the way they can go at their own pace and take classes not offered in their high school.

Nauset Regional High School junior Kirby Nichols, 16, wants to study business in college but couldn’t find a marketing class at his school.

He’s taken two marketing classes online, finishing a year’s worth of work in one semester.

Power point presentations and videos helped Nichols grasp key concepts, and Grozier graded the portfolio he created for a make-believe business.

“It’s a tremendous opportunity for the students,” Nantucket High School Principal John Buckey said.

The island school has offered online courses for years, and currently has slots for 50 online courses per year in subjects that include criminology, animal behavior, philosophy and astronomy.

“It provides them exposure to a diverse array of courses that students might not otherwise access,” Buckey said.

Nantucket High School is one of several Cape and Islands high schools that belong to the Virtual High School Collaborative, which also offers core academic courses and foreign languages.

“We had a student take AP Spanish in the past with great success; she received a 5 on the exam,” Buckey wrote in an e-mail.

BEATING THE COMPETITION

Several school officials on the Cape have said they may beef up their online programming to combat a wave of virtual school districts scheduled to open within the next few years.

The Commonwealth Virtual Schools Act, signed into law Jan. 2, allows as many as 10 new online-only school districts to enroll up to 19,000 students in the next seven years.

Brick-and-mortar schools stand to lose \$5,000 in state money for each student who leaves the district to attend a virtual school, Jeffrey Elliott, CEO of the Virtual High School Collaborative, said at a meeting in Hyannis in February.

The Massachusetts Virtual Academy — a spinoff of the Greenfield public schools — has applied to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to become the first virtual school approved under the new law.

The academy plans to educate 750 students in grades K-12 starting this fall, adding an additional 500 by 2015-2016.

“It’s kind of the wave of the future,” said Karen Butler, virtual learning coordinator at Barnstable High School. “We’re going virtual.”

About 150 Barnstable High School students take online courses, including AP and honors courses not offered at the high school or credit recovery and core curriculum classes, Butler said.

In addition, 40 students in a certified nursing program take the medical terminology course work online, she said.

“We have different learning styles,” Butler said. “Not every student does well sitting in front of a teacher listening to a lecture.”

Cape students typically take the online classes in computer labs and school libraries, though some receive instruction at home for medical reasons or because a for-credit job conflicts with school hours.

In the Edgenuity programs, a teacher talks in a small top corner while information and graphics flash across the screen.

“Some students miss the face-to-face” interaction, said Butler at Barnstable High School, which offers Edgenuity and Virtual High School courses. “They never meet the teacher. They probably never meet the kids in the class.”

Students taking online courses still need the guidance of on-site high school teachers, Nauset Regional High School guidance counselor Richard Durgin said.

Grozier and Tobler answer questions, encourage students having trouble, remind them of assignments and help them track their progress, he said.

For some students online is the best way to learn but others need additional help, Durgin said.

Jake Howarth, 17, a Nauset junior from Brewster, used online courses to prepare for SATs and MCAS after moving to the United States from England this summer.

“It really did reinforce what I needed to know,” he said.

Education Committee votes along party lines to stall virtual charter schools

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

5/13/13

(Triple)

Maine would impose a moratorium on virtual charter schools and require that all charter schools function as nonprofit organizations if three measures endorsed Monday by the Legislature’s Education Committee become law.

The committee voted 8-4 along party lines, with Democrats in the majority, to recommend passage of three bills that Democrats said would keep the profit motive out of public education.

Virtual charter schools, in which students study nearly exclusively online, do not yet exist in Maine, although a law passed by the Republican-led Legislature in 2011 allows them. While supporters view virtual schools as a cost-effective option that could work best for some students, others see them as too far afield from traditional schools where students and teacher interact in person.

Monday’s votes illustrate the wide rift on education policy between legislative Democrats and Gov. Paul LePage, who has made charter schools a cornerstone for his education reform agenda. The governor, who last week unveiled legislation that would lift the 10-school cap on public charter schools in Maine, advocates for charter schools as choices for families seeking to better meet the needs of students who struggle in traditional public schools. Democrats argue that they siphon limited funding away from public schools, creating an environment in which problems caused by underfunding of public schools become the rationale to expand charter schools in Maine.

“I do believe that virtual learning has a role in our state. I have a lot more concern when it comes to virtual public full-time charter schools,” said Sen. Rebecca Millett, D-South Portland, who co-chairs the Education Committee. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable removing the child completely from the public school environment... I really would appreciate hitting the pause button.”

Millett's comments came Monday during a work session on LD 995, An Act to Establish a Moratorium on the Approval and Operation of Virtual and Public Charter Schools, which was sponsored by Senate President Justin Alford, D-Portland. The bill would bar the Maine Charter School Commission from authorizing any virtual charter school until the Legislature enacts a virtual charter school law separate from the existing charter school law. Alford also proposes in the bill that virtual charter schools would be part-time only and only for high school students.

Republicans, who in general support Maine's charter school movement, opposed Alford's bill.

"I have a lot of confidence in our charter school commission, and I'm not prepared to ask for a moratorium at this point," said Rep. Peter Johnson, R-Greenville, who voted in the minority Monday.

A related bill, LD 481, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing Virtual Public Charter Schools, sponsored by Rep. Bruce MacDonald, D-Boothbay, the House chairman of the Education Committee, also received a party-line "ought to pass" recommendation. Originally wide-ranging, the bill was essentially gutted except for two provisions: that all part-time and full-time virtual charter school teachers must hold a valid teacher certification or acquire one within three years and that the Department of Education and the Maine Charter School Commission will determine what it cost to run a virtual charter school. MacDonald is seeking to place a limit on that number because he said online schools shouldn't cost as much as brick-and-mortar schools to run.

During public hearings on April 12, Education Commissioner Stephen Bowen testified against the bills.

"These bills are designed to stop the development of virtual charter schools . . . , by subjecting them to onerous regulations, and by prohibiting full-time online schooling and prohibiting elementary and middle school virtual education," he said.

A third bill, LD 671, An Act to Protect Charter Schools by Requiring Them to be Operated as Nonprofit Organizations, was sponsored by Rep. Matthea Daughtry, D-Brunswick. It would require that public charter schools and virtual public charter schools be operated as nonprofit organizations.

Millett said she doesn't believe for-profit companies "have a role to play in the way education is delivered to our kids," but her Republican colleagues on the committee disagreed. Rep. Matthew Pouliot, R-Augusta, said there are hundreds of contracts between government agencies and for-profit industries.

"I can't understand why [schools] are different," he said. "I'm just wondering why it's not OK with education if the for-profit company would provide a really high-quality education to our students." Johnson agreed. "I don't see a good reason to discriminate against a class like this," he said.

But Democrats outnumbered Republicans and sent the measure to the full Legislature with an "ought to pass" recommendation.

MIDWESTERN STATES

BlueSky Online school rebounding after state effort to shut it down

TWIN CITIES PIONEER PRESS

4/28/13

(Triple)

A year after her school concluded a protracted battle with state education officials, the new leader of BlueSky Online says it is on the rebound.

Amy Larsen, interim director of the West St. Paul-based online charter school, says enrollment is growing and staff is looking forward to new initiatives. School offices were recently relocated to a floor with more space in the Wentworth Avenue office building they occupy.

“I think we are in a strong position,” Larsen said. “Everything we offer to students, the support, the online model, it’s different than anywhere else.”

The school is for grades seven through 12. It serves mostly at-risk students who don’t fit into typical school environments, but it also has accelerated learners.

The charter school recently received accreditation from the North Central Association on Accreditation and School Improvement. The group spent days going through the virtual school’s curriculum, administrative structure and policies before recommending it receive accreditation, Larsen said.

“It is a validation,” Larsen said of the school’s recent certification. “They have high standards, and we want to prove we do, as well.”

Enrollment at the school is expected to top 400 next year. That’s a 40 percent increase from last fall, but far from the nearly 700 students who attended the school before trouble began with the state Department of Education.

The department started investigating BlueSky in 2009 after receiving complaints that the school was not meeting state curriculum standards. The inquiry dragged on, and the state tried repeatedly to close the school.

The charter spent \$200,000 defending itself. In the end, Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius agreed with an administrative law judge that there was not enough evidence to close the school.

BlueSky supporters called the decision a “vindication” and characterized the department’s investigation as an “overreach” of its authority.

Virtual education draws a wide mix of students and teachers who like the flexibility and challenge of online schooling.

Karen Kraco taught science at BlueSky for five years before leaving the school to return to a brick-and-mortar classroom last year. She wasn't away long.

BlueSky recruited her to be the school's orientation and retention coordinator, a key effort that helps students who struggle to focus complete their course work. Many of BlueSky's students are single parents, dropouts or working adults.

"As an educator, this is the most rewarding work I've done," Kraco said.

Kraco works with students such as Caitlain Jaus, a 17-year-old senior from Lakeville. Jaus struggled to focus in middle school and was bullied.

She came to BlueSky as a seventh-grader, and her failing grades quickly turned around. She now plans to attend college after graduation.

Jaus liked the freedom of the online model, but she knows it's not for everybody.

"You have to be self-disciplined and not a procrastinator," Jaus said. "I feel like I learned more because I wasn't distracted by other kids."

BlueSky is developing new initiatives that Larsen and Kraco believe will help the school compete for students in an online education market that has increased competition. More and more charter and traditional schools are launching online schools to meet student demand.

There are now nearly 30 online schools in the state serving more than 10,000 students.

BlueSky is working to develop more career training and plans to offer "blended learning" classes where students visit classrooms at the school's offices once or twice a week.

"This model doesn't fit every kid," Larsen said. "But for some it's their only option."

Board approves virtual school proposal

GARDEN CITY TELEGRAM

5/7/13

(Triple)

USD 457 Board of Education members Monday night approved a virtual school be put into place at the Alternative Education Center.

The center is in the J.D. Adams Building, 1312 N. Seventh St.

The measure passed 5-0. Board members Alex Wallace and Gloria Hopkins were absent.

AEC Principal Mark Ronn presented information to the board during a regularly-scheduled meeting Monday in favor of the virtual option for students. He said he recognized the need for the virtual school as more students are turning to online and electronic alternatives to complete their education.

An electronic curriculum, the Bison program, already is in place, but students come on site to complete their work. The virtual program would allow students to work from anywhere, Ronn said.

“This will give them the full virtual experience. They can enroll, register, get their classes set and do schoolwork from anywhere,” he said.

In addition to students being able to finish school in a way that may be more convenient, the school also benefits the district.

More students means more state funding, and Ronn said the virtual program will help keep students in the district.

Ronn said 73 students have left the district in the past three years for virtual programs outside the district, which has resulted in a \$292,000 loss of funding to the district.

Ronn said those students often are not successful and return to the AEC more behind than before.

He said the virtual school can be implemented at minimum expense to the district.

“We already have the technology and support already in place,” he said.

Board members asked if the AEC would open the school up to students outside the district.

“We’re concentrating on our own kids here. If you have a quality program in place, that would be no problem at some point,” Ronn said.

Jean Clifford, BOE president, likes the flexibility the virtual school would provide.

“I see it as an advantage for students who want to home school, but want to have the choice to use the school for electives,” she said.

“I think this will capture a lot of students who are looking for other options. This would not only be for reimbursement, but also to serve our whole community,” Clifford added.

Lara Bors, board member, asked if long-term suspended students would be able to use the facilities.

Ronn said he had discussed that possibility with USD 457 Superintendent Rick Atha, and they determined those students would be able to use the facility.

During the meeting, the board also unanimously voted to renew the district's contract with Russell Child Development Center, and also discussed the board's five-year strategic plan, with emphasis on the first initiative — student achievement.

Bradley County has 4 graduates in its first Virtual School class

CLEVELAND DAILY BANNER

5/19/13

(Triple)

The first class of graduates from Bradley County Virtual School walked across the stage to receive their high school diplomas on Friday.

This was the first year Bradley County Schools offered the predominately online school to students.

The four virtual school graduates joined Reach Adult High School and Bradley County Adult Education students to celebrate the completion of their accomplishments.

Reach Adult High School graduates are adults who have come back to finish their high school diploma. Bradley County Adult Education graduates received their GED diploma.

Virtual School graduate Kea Wooten had been home-schooled for a year prior to being a virtual school.

“It was interesting. It was new. It was fun,” Wooten said. “And really convenient because I have a baby.”

Wooten said she enjoyed the flexibility of the program to fit with her schedule.

Fellow graduate Elizabeth Maynard said the program had been “complicated.” Maynard was glad to have the virtual school opportunity after asking her parents to home-school her.

“We’ve had a very good year and we are certainly looking forward to next year,” BCVS Principal Zoe Renfro said.

Renfro is also the principal of Reach Adult High School and Bradley County Adult Education.

“All of these students needed a nontraditional way to complete their educations. I am so proud to work for a school system that believes that every person deserves an education,” Renfro said.

Bradley County Adult Education Santasha Davis said she appreciated the encouragement that the school’s staff gave her.

“By me going back to school, I inspired my sister, my son and a family friend to also go back to school,” Davis said.

Davis said the GED tests were “intimidating.” Yet, after each one she passed she was “so happy.”

This year’s is the largest graduating class Bradley County Adult Education has seen.

Davis will attend Cleveland State Community College in the fall.

Fellow graduate James Whisam hopes to continue his education and become certified in machine welding. He said he heard about the adult education opportunity through his job at Mueller.

CPS goes outside the box to sponsor a charter school at Aiken

WVXU CINCINNATI

4/22/13

(Triple)

It’s unusual for a public school district to partner with a charter school, but that will happen this fall when Carpe Diem opens inside the new Aiken High School in College Hill. It is one of two schools at Aiken. The other is New-Tech, focused on project-based learning.

Carpe Diem is focused on personalized learning. It’s a concept that is spreading nationwide. Students in grades 6 through 12 are enrolled in classes based on an assessment. One student, for example, could be enrolled in 6th grade math and 10th grade English.

WVXU went to Indianapolis to see the Carpe Diem model. Carpe Diem-Meridian (Indy) is just the second such school to open nationwide. The first was started in Yuma, Arizona by Rick Ogston, a former marine, marriage counselor, pastor, businessman and educator. Frustrated with the status quo of learning, it was 2001 when Ogston said he had an Ichabod Crane moment.

“When you realize that Ichabod Crane would just be as comfortable in my classroom on that day at that time as he was in his own, evidence that not a lot had changed then.”

THE CONCEPT WAS BORN

Ogston started Carpe Diem at the University of Phoenix. The personalized learning was a concept he said he thought would work some years earlier. Top testing scores put it on the map, and foundations nationwide began to spread the word. Indiana's governor wanted to know what it would take to get Carpe Diem to his state. Carpe Diem-Meridian opened last fall.

CARPE DIEM-MERIDIAN (INDIANAPOLIS)

Just north of downtown Indianapolis is the brand new building experts say is on the cutting edge of education. Carpe Diem students spend half their day in the classroom, half in a self-guided digital learning center, and are constantly monitored to see how much progress they're making. To stay on track students must average 1% progress each day during a 90 day semester. Principal Mark Forner even reads a top ten list every morning

The 90 students are all income levels, all education levels and come from a mix of public, private and home schooling. In August they are tested and put on a personalized track. This can change throughout the year .

8th grader Jaylen Byard is doing his honors math homework focusing on space figures and drawings. He wants to be an air traffic controller. Students are asked what kind of a career they want and take aptitude tests. Byard used to get D's. He's now getting Bs. Anyone who scores below an 80% in is forced to stop and get extra help from teachers.

CARPE DIEM WILL OPEN UP INSIDE AIKEN HIGH SCHOOL THIS FALL

Carpe Diem founder Ogston says CPS Superintendent Mary Ronan had heard of his school and visited it in Arizona. He credits Ronan for looking past the competition of public vs charter.

"There tends to be more of a competitive attitude, rather than collaborative and Mary has just taken that out of the picture."

HERE ARE RENDERINGS OF THE NEW AIKEN HIGH SCHOOL

The school is tuition-free and will get money from the State of Ohio. Enrollment is underway for Carpe Diem and Aiken's other new school, New-Tech.

Other Carpe Diem schools are planned for Texas and Idaho.

Hutch district will offer online virtual schooling

HUTCHINSON NEWS

7/8/13

(Triple)

The Hutchinson school district this week rolled out a new program that will make online school available to virtually any student within district boundaries - kindergarten through 12th grade - for the upcoming school year.

District officials hope the program will recapture students who have turned to outside online schools or home-school students who may desire a professional instructor for some subjects.

USD 308 is offering the new program through a partnership with Southeast Kansas Education Service Center, also known as the Greenbush education cooperative, which itself has partnered with national online content provider Edgenuity. By participating in the program, the district is able to count the students it signs up as part of its annual student enrollment count, to receive base student aid.

It will take a minimum of seven or eight students signing up for the program for the district to break even, said USD 308 spokesman Ray Hemman. After that, the program will make “a small profit” for the district on each student.

District officials had no estimate on how many students they expect to sign up.

“We had 58 kids last year (living within the district boundaries) who attended virtual school somewhere else in the state of Kansas,” said District Superintendent Shelly Kiblinger. “They couldn’t attend 308 because we didn’t offer a virtual school. Now they have that option.”

“We’re hoping eventually to have between 50 and 60 in the district who’ll be attending,” Kiblinger said. “We know we won’t get that overnight. We’ll be really excited if we get 10 students the first year.”

The school board voted May 13 to proceed with the Greenbush program and the Kansas State Department of Education has since approved 308’s participation.

GROWING PROGRAM

Amy Reilly, a longtime USD 308 educator, will be the district’s program coordinator. Reilly also serves as curriculum and instruction technology specialist for the district.

Hutchinson is one of 43 school districts in the state that will participate in the program next year, said Ronda Fincher, director of alternative education at Greenbush. That’s up from 35 last school year, the first year of the program.

“The way it works is... they (the district) let us know all the student info so we can enroll the student and buy a (software) license for the Edgenuity program,” Fincher said. “We hire the teachers and train the teachers, and help with all the reports that go to the Department of Education. They remain students of the district, who have total control over how it all works.”

The program offers core classes for elementary students, and both core and elective classes for high school. Participating in the Greenbush virtual partnership allows districts to offer advanced courses they might otherwise be unable to provide, such as “Green Design and Technology,” Kiblinger noted. Besides Edgenuity, online course content providers are Calvert and Aventa.

It’s likely students now attending Hutchinson High School also will have access to some of the online courses, particularly language classes not offered locally, Kiblinger said, though the district hasn’t worked out all the requirements to allow that.

“We’re going to slowly explore (course) options for our kids at brick and mortar that we don’t offer,” she said. “We’ll look at that on an individual basis.”

What’s more likely to occur, however, she said, is for the new virtual students to sign up for an individual “hands-on” on-campus course, such as art, technology or band.

“If we had a student who wanted to enroll online and take band from a brick and mortar school, that is something we can certainly accommodate,” she said.

Any student enrolling in the virtual program will be required to pay the district’s \$55 enrollment fee, Kiblinger said. That will allow them, besides taking online courses, to participate in extracurricular school activities, such as sports or an honor choir.

Otherwise there is no direct cost to the student, with Greenbush providing textbooks. Students are responsible for supplying their own technology and Internet connection and a DSL or faster connection speed is required.

TRACKING

When a student completes a course online, Greenbush then sends the student’s percentage score to the district, which decides the letter grade to assign, Fincher said.

Both the student’s parents and the school district will have daily access, to check whether a student is participating and how they are doing.

“They need to watch and make sure the student is successful, to make sure how often they’re getting on and whether they’re progressing at a normal rate to stay on track for the class,” Fincher said.

Some high school courses and annual state assessments will require students to take “proctored” tests on campus or at designated sites, which district teachers will oversee, Hemman said.

“It makes sure the person who is supposed to be taking the test is taking the test,” Hemman said. “It’s an easy process for us.”

Under its agreement with Greenbush, the district will pay \$2,000 per student in grades 6 to 12, and \$3,175 for grades K-5.

“We had some schools last year that went through the approval process and didn’t have any students,” Fincher said. “They don’t pay unless there are students.”

WESTERN STATES

‘Virtual high school’ helps kids succeed

PRESS ENTERPRISE

8/21/13

(Triple)

Jurupa Unified School District officials are describing their new “virtual high school” as a chance to succeed for students who have difficulty adjusting to traditional high schools. That includes those who are shy, need to work or have family commitments.

“These students are bright and have a lot of potential,” said Luis Murillo, principal of Rivercrest Preparatory online high school. “They don’t feel comfortable in a large school setting.”

“If we didn’t offer this (option), they wouldn’t stay in school,” he said.

Rivercrest allows students to take college prep subjects such as algebra, world literature and advanced placement calculus but with the flexibility to fulfill other commitments. At present, 28 students – freshmen through seniors – are enrolled. Rivercrest is housed on the campus of Jurupa Valley High School.

Several Riverside County districts have online courses for high school students. Riverside Unified School District operates Riverside Virtual School, and Lake Elsinore and Murrieta Valley unified school districts also have online programs, said Rick Peoples, a spokesman for the Riverside County Office of Education. The newest online programs offered by districts include Moreno Valley, Palm Springs and Corona-Norco, he said.

Some online charter schools based in other counties also enroll students in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, said Dan Evans, a spokesman for the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools.

“There’s a lot of schools that offer instruction online but it’s not the entire school,” and the online instruction tends to be tailored for independent study, Evans said.

For instance, Redlands Unified School District offers high school students an online Latin class, because there aren’t enough students who want to take the language at either Redlands or Redlands East Valley high schools to make up a whole class.

“I think there’s a consensus among educators that (online is) going to be part of instruction,” Evans said. It works well for highly motivated students who want to progress faster than their peers, but not necessarily everyone. “I think most kids and most parents want that teacher in the classroom.”

David Doubravsky, the Jurupa district’s assistant superintendent of education services, said the district made its first foray into online education by offering classes for the 2012 and 2013 summer school sessions.

Based on comments from students who took the classes and their parents, the Jurupa district has crafted a program that requires Rivercrest students to be on campus one period per day.

“Parents felt that without that interaction with teachers, kids would fall behind,” said Jenna Saugstad, Rivercrest’s assistant principal.

Students also maintain a connection to their “home school” by enrolling in classes that might not be offered online or by continuing to participate in activities such as sports or band, Murillo said.

For example, junior Lexi Chastain is enrolled in Rivercrest, but is taking Italian 3 at Patriot High School every morning.

The Rivercrest curriculum has students take one class at a time. Each class is three weeks long and during that time, students are immersed in the subject.

“We’re expecting students to be on a computer six to eight hours per day,” Saugstad said.

Tests are given on campus, in front of a teacher, and the computer program locks a student out if he or she tries to get on the Internet to find an answer, Saugstad said.

Isabel Martinez Angulo, is a 13-year-old freshman whose home school is Patriot High School. This week she was in the Rivercrest computer lab researching a paper on five 20th century people who made significant contributions to society.

“I’ve never been outgoing,” Isabel said. “It’s hard to concentrate with all the drama on campus. I’m not into that kind of stuff.”

Isabel said the online school allows her to work at her own pace and offers constant challenges.

“I like it,” she said.

Joshua Riley, a 15-year-old junior at Patriot High School, said Rivercrest allows him to learn at an accelerated pace that he hopes will lead to an early graduation.

“I can zoom through things I understand. And get help for things I don’t understand,” Joshua said.

Joshua said family commitments make it hard to attend a traditional high school. That includes a part-time job and helping to care for his 97-year-old grandfather.

“He needs a lot of help,” he said.

Blended learning: Teachers plus computers equal success

DESERET NEWS

1/5/13

(Triple)

Carpe Diem Collegiate High School in Yuma, Ariz., looks more like a call center than a high school. It features a huge room full of rows and rows of cubicles where students, who attend classes four days a week, work for half a day at computers that track their daily progress. Teachers lead other instruction in small groups, according to a recent story in the Hechinger Report.

Carpe Diem is perhaps one of the best examples in America of a new teaching phenomenon that could change the face of public education, especially at the K-12 level. It’s called “blended learning,” which combines face-to-face time with teachers with online instruction.

More students are taking blended courses than ever before, but because so many students are in programs that aren’t tracked, exact numbers aren’t known, according to the International Association of K-12 Online Learning. iNACOL estimates that two-thirds of school districts offer some online or blended programs, and that a large majority of those have relatively few students involved in online or blended learning, and rely on content providers outside their school systems, such as Khan Academy or online courses from colleges or training programs.

Students in online learning environments perform modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction, and blending online and face-to-face instruction increases that advantage, according to a 2009 U.S. Department of Education's analysis of several studies.

Recent data — with greater detail about learning gains in K-12 settings — isn't available, because there is little standardization in the ways blended learning is popping up at schools across the nation, said Michael Horn, co-founder and education executive director of the Innosight Institute, a non-profit think tank. For now, innovative new schools experimenting with blended learning offer the best snapshot of the model's promise, he said. But critics charge that blended learning also has its problems.

PREMIUM BLEND

Blended learning is set apart from other styles of computer-aided learning by specific elements, said Horn, whose think tank applies theories of disruptive innovation to solve problems in the social sector.

Horn says blended learning is happening at least partly in brick-and-mortar locations under teacher supervision, but also through online delivery of courses that give the student control of when, where, how, and at what speed learning happens. That means one student might use an iPad to move ahead through several units of a history course during vacation time and another might spend extra time at school to fill in gaps in algebra understanding, allowing her to move ahead faster in the future. Students who surge ahead might choose to take college courses through concurrent enrollment.

Blended learning is centered on the needs of each student, and — when implemented well — can meet those needs in a precise and personal way, said Susan Patrick, president of iNACOL. She counters questions about kids being stuck behind computers all day by saying blended learning models actually increase student involvement with other students, and their teacher. That's because there is no need to spend class time listening passively as teachers lecture, so students spend their off-computer time working in small groups, getting coaching from teachers, hearing from outside experts and doing hands-on activities in groups, Patrick said.

“If we are honest, we have to say there are blended learning implementations that are not that good,” he said. “With the good ones, you might spend an hour or two on the computer, but the magic is happening off the computer, through peer tutoring, small-group instruction, projects, tinkering — all those things you would hope students would do. In many ways, the biggest surprise for me as I go into blended schools around the country is how much peer-to-peer interaction there is.”

EARLY RESULTS

Horn likes what he sees at Carpe Diem Collegiate High School and Middle School. Because students at the school can progress at their own pace, many are moving years ahead in the curriculum, he said, accumulating college credits while still in high school. And attending the school only four days a week frees up the students to work in career apprenticeship programs, he added.

Carpe Diem's math and reading scores outpace averages for Arizona schools, even though 46 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, a poverty indicator. However, achievement test data from the Arizona Department of Education shows that after good results in 2010, achievement slid downward in 2011 and 2012. Math percentile scores dropped from 89 to 70 over the three years, and writing percentiles plummeted from 84 to 53. The principal at Carpe Diem told the Arizona Republic in spring of 2011 that the dip resulted from the school switching to a different reading curriculum and taking in an unusually large influx of new students who were struggling.

Plans are underway to replicate the Carpe Diem model at six Indiana charter schools over the next several years, and that worries David Safier, a former teacher who writes about education politics for the blogforarizona.com news outlet. The lack of up-to-date research on blended learning's efficacy in K-12 settings is one of Safier's concerns. The idea of using computers to justify increasing the ratio of teachers to students is another.

At Carpe Diem, for instance, five teachers and four teachers' aides work with 226 students. Patrick says blended learning creates a fundamental shift in instruction practices that makes it workable.

"We've seen some models where they have bolstered class size, and the teachers say they can teach more students, and get paid more," Horn said. "That could work in many cases, but it's dangerous to universalize."

"The idea of using computers as a substitute, as opposed to a supplement, for teacher-led education is really immature at this point," Safier said. He believes online education is a good way to give students in isolated areas access to academic courses they would otherwise miss out on, but sees no benefit in large numbers of students learning from computers instead of teachers.

Michael Barbour, a professor at Detroit's Wayne State University, has raised concerns that Carpe Diem's curriculum is designed to get kids to do well on standardized tests, but doesn't foster critical thinking skills. School administrators responded that they are working on creating more projects that promote critical thinking as teachers adjust to their new roles.

SAVING MONEY?

Developing blended programs is expensive, and expecting positive student results without the necessary investment is unrealistic, said a report by Evergreen Education Group, an online education-consulting group based in Colorado. To achieve the benefits of blended learning, states must make large investments in computer hardware and software, including data systems and

student tracking software. Those investments vary dramatically according to school circumstances, and so far it isn't clear whether they will save money in the future, said a report in thejournal.com, an online magazine about education technology.

"I don't think (blended learning) will cost more, but it's not clear that it will save more, either," Horn said. But, blended learning models offer districts the possibility of paying for students' mastery of material, instead paying upfront for learning that doesn't happen. Horn cites Utah's Electronic High School, which ties performance to paychecks. If students don't complete a computerized course successfully, the for-profit companies that provided the content gets a 50 percent deduction to its paycheck.

At this point, though, "the real reason to adopt blended learning isn't to save money, but because of the benefits for students," Horn said.

CHANGING TEACHERS' ROLES

Blended learning changes the way teachers spend their time, how much they know about each of their students' progress, and when they know it. Ideally, the new model allows teachers to spend less time on mundane tasks like lesson planning and correcting daily assignments, freeing up more time to work with small groups of students who need special help and instigate collaborative projects that encourage critical thinking skills. With appropriate tracking software, teachers can see the mastery level of every student, every day.

"You don't get kids who are bored, and kids who are woefully behind, and will continue to have a gap in learning," Patrick said. "You can catch kids up, and keep them on their learning edge."

Teachers may be responsible for a much larger swath of content, because some students are well below grade level and some are well above, Horn said. The online piece of the blended learning model exposes that, and let teachers design ways to address learning gaps through peer tutoring and small-group instruction.

"The computer does the 'know' and 'do' part," Horn said. "The teacher can focus on understanding, analyzing and applying. It puts the deeper learning into the teacher's bailiwick. We weren't able to get there in the past because teachers were stuck in the 'know' and 'do' part."

To capture the benefits of blended learning, careful professional development for teachers will be needed, and those teachers will need accurate reporting tools, said a report by K12 Inc., a technology-based education company that provides online curricula.

Catholic schools update to compete with charter schools

SEATTLE TIMES

5/21/13

(Triple)

Starting next fall, St. Paul School in South Seattle will become the second Catholic school in Seattle to make online learning a staple of the school day.

Across town in Southwest Seattle, Holy Family School is working toward establishing a dual-language program, similar to ones that have been very popular at a number of Seattle's public schools.

Other Catholic schools may soon make similarly big changes in the way they educate students, partly to update their curriculum, but also to position themselves to compete when the first charter schools arrive in Washington state in the next few years.

"These are things we wanted to do anyway. But the arrival of charter schools gives it more urgency and maybe allows us to press the issue harder," said Sue Mecham, interim executive director at the Fulcrum Foundation, an organization that raises scholarship money and provides assistance to struggling Catholic schools.

The Seattle Archdiocese, which oversees 74 schools with 21,000 students across Western Washington, is promoting innovation as part of a new strategic plan that it will complete this year. The goals include strengthening Catholic education and spreading the word about what Catholic schools have to offer.

In the view of the archdiocese, parents need to understand that Catholic schools aren't just charter schools with tuition, but proven schools with long histories.

"We've been here, delivering Catholic education, before Washington was a state," said the Rev. Stephen Rowan, the system's superintendent. "The challenge will be to get our stories out in such a way that parents at least realize that we are a competitive choice for them."

The archdiocese has reason to worry about its schools' future. Nationally, enrollment in Catholic schools has declined significantly over the past decade. That's attributed in part to the rise of charter schools, which are public schools that are privately run and operate independently of their local school districts.

Some researchers say that Catholic schools in low-income, urban neighborhoods have lost the most ground to charters because the charters that have opened around them often have a similar focus on character as well as academics.

In this state, Catholic school enrollment has stayed relatively steady, with a drop of just 170 students in Western Washington last year. The Seattle Archdiocese has not closed a school in more than 10 years.

Yet even now, before charter schools arrive, some of Washington's urban Catholic schools are in trouble. In Tacoma, for example, Holy Rosary was on the verge of closing before it started a new language-immersion program last fall, which helped raise enrollment there.

St. Therese Academy was the first Catholic school in Seattle to plunge into a new way of doing business. Like St. Paul, it decided to pursue what's called blended learning, which means students spend part of the school day with their teachers and part using educational-software programs that electronically track their progress and let them proceed at their own pace.

At some schools, blended learning means students go to large computer labs. But at St. Therese — and soon, at St. Paul — the laptops are in the classroom, and students take turns using them.

The approach is experimental. There are some promising examples of blended learning across the country, but it is new enough that there isn't a strong base of research that proves its effectiveness. Rowan said the Seattle Archdiocese will closely monitor all the innovations, and then decide whether to promote them to other Catholic schools.

In addition to blended learning and language-immersion programs, some Catholic schools in Western Washington are looking at becoming STEM schools, with an emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math. The one that's the furthest along is Visitation School, also in Tacoma.

The changes cost money, at least at first. St. Therese got its program going through a partnership with Seton Education Partners in New York, which included a \$300,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

To start the second blended-learning program, at St. Paul's, the Fulcrum Foundation has raised \$300,000, with about \$200,000 coming from a half-dozen individual donors.

Part of that money will go to the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) at the University of Notre Dame, which is helping the school's principal and teachers put the new program into place.

The hope is that St. Paul and St. Therese will become self-sufficient in a few years, and no longer require subsidies from their parishes or elsewhere.

At St. Paul's, Principal Betsy Kromer said she's excited about blending learning because she thinks it will help teachers tailor instruction to each student and will increase the amount of time teachers can work with students in small groups.

"If we're individualizing for every student ... I don't know how that can be a bad thing," she said.

She also hopes it will help to increase the school's enrollment, which this year stands at 134 students, the lowest in recent memory.

New eAcademy in Redlands will offer online schooling

SAN BERNARDINO SUN

6/7/13

(Triple)

In a medium-sized classroom behind Orangewood High School, seven teachers were discussing how to promote the recently launched Redlands eAcademy.

Under the direction of the Redlands Unified School District, the academy will combine online and in-person instruction to teach kindergarten through 12th-grade students a variety of subjects using modern technology and resources provided by its teaching staff, a counselor and Principal John Massie.

The move comes after district officials began to notice a boom in online learning, and an increase in enrollment numbers at area charter schools.

A staff of seven -- including Massie -- will be able to handle up to 120 students every year, with teachers laying out lesson plans and homework to be completed by each student at the beginning of each school week.

Each student will meet with their teachers on-site once a week for discussions, take tests and participate in additional activities, such as labs, with their peers.

Online videos and parent resources will be available throughout the week for lessons to be taught smoothly outside of the classroom setting.

And should any student or parent need help outside of the classroom, teachers are only an email away.

"Part of the difference students will see (when attending) is you're going to get a lot more attention from teachers that you wouldn't get sitting in a classroom of 35," said Massie. "When you're meeting one-on-one with a teacher, it's kind of hard to hide behind the other kids. And what's great about this is... when you're online the teachers can see exactly what you're doing every day.

So they can monitor your progress and the teachers here are really great about sending texts or emails... so they can have their finger on the pulse better than normal classrooms.”

So-called Meets with fellow students and teachers will also be held throughout the week to keep the goal of communication going.

The school will follow the traditional school year set in place by the district, including winter, spring and summer breaks.

For its first year — the school began a test run through an independent study program during the 2012-13 school year — the academy will only enroll students up to the 11th grade, Massie said.

Parents who have already pulled their children out of public schools or are considering doing so are the academy’s target audience.

The hope is to draw students from all over the area, but interested parents and potential students would meet with a counselor to determine if the online school is right for them.

Questions about what the school offers will also be addressed at the meetings, said school officials, with parents first meeting with the counselor, followed by the student.

Massie said the counseling sessions are important because if the school is not a right fit, they can let parents know so they can find an alternative for their children.

The aim is to respect diverse talents and learning styles, and to provide an environment where all students are challenged.

Portable classrooms behind Orangewood High are being converted into laboratories and lecture halls to host activities when students are on campus.

One of the most asked questions is whether a student would be able to go to college from the academy, said teacher Kathleen Collins. The answer is yes.

Parents are invited to learn more at an information night 6:30 p.m. June 18 at the school at 820 W. Stuart Ave.

Additional parent nights are planned before the start of the new school year, which begins Aug. 14.

For more information, visit rea.redlandsusd.net or call 909-748-6941.

Online schools, blended learning provide varied options for East Valley students

EAST VALLEY TRIBUNE

8/4/13

(Triple)

With the school year approaching, many local school districts are flaunting success with online schooling for today's busy, on-the-go, technology wielding student.

Online schooling, a format that's been expanding in colleges during the past decade, is now available and attracting younger students who want the high school or middle school experience, but want to make it their own at their own pace.

"Students choose to take online courses for various reasons like illness, peer conflicts, to work faster and get ahead, credit recovery, or scheduling conflicts," said Helen Riddle, executive director of the Mesa Distance Learning Program.

The program began in 1998 and now provides courses for 38 districts in Arizona, as well as several out-of-state and some out-of-country students.

For these students, school isn't about going to prom and playing on the varsity football team; they're taking opportunities to explore hobbies like touring in a band, competing in dog shows, or walking down fashion runways in New York, all while attending middle school and high school.

Charter schools are also offering such opportunities, such as Primavera Online High School, headquartered at 2471 N. Arizona Ave. in Chandler.

"We have found that when students feel more in control of their education, they are more committed to it," said Damian Creamer, founder and CEO of Primavera Online High School.

"I have always believed that all students have the potential to succeed when provided with the right tools. As many students and parents will attest, one size does not fit all when it comes to education."

Creamer founded the online school in 2001 to offer students a personalized education after working at the University of Phoenix. Primavera is building a 13,000-square-foot facility in Chandler for middle school students called the Primavera Blended Learning Center, which is scheduled to open this fall.

Unlike traditional schools with a classroom and a teacher giving a lecture for the day, online students at Primavera complete their lessons online and go at their own pace.

At the blended campus, the goal is to combine face-to-face classroom teaching methods with online learning activities so students can perform hands-on projects and labs led by instructors.

Creamer said the school serves about 6,000 students per year. The students that go through his program still learn many of the person-to-person interaction skills they need to be successful in college, despite it being mostly virtual.

“Much of life post graduation requires strong communication and working skills across in-person and digital channels, and students who have developed these skills early on we feel are at a strong advantage in not only college, but throughout their lives,” he said.

Primavera says it appeals to students who are self-motivated, want to accelerate their education to graduate early, and prefer learning from home. It started offering seventh- and eighth-grade courses in 2011 and sixth-grade courses last year, as it saw potential in building an online middle school.

As a charter school, the distance learning program receives funding from both private and public funds and it is accredited every five years through the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, the last time being January 2010.

Parents are required to verify their child’s attendance each week with the online program and a minimum of 30 hours are required for the week.

Even though distance learning might cater to a child who lives in rural, remote areas, “geographically, 75 percent of Primavera’s students are located in Phoenix area with other student populations representing the smaller cities of Tucson and Prescott,” according to Creamer’s FlipSwitch website.

Creamer launched FlipSwitch — a company that offers online management software to help track and manage student data for schools as well as allow schools to create and manage courses online to add to the school’s curriculum — in 2011.

Creamer said he designed it to accommodate a variety of learning styles to benefit schools ability to communicate to students.

In that same year, Gilbert Unified School District started the Global Academy and the Chandler Unified School District launched its Chandler Online Academy to provide an alternative option for students and parents who were in need of a flexible education, according to the programs coordinator, J’me Upchurch.

Last year, the Chandler Online Academy had more than 400 students. More than 600 students enrolled for classes this summer, and Upchurch said the school expects at least 500 students in the fall.

“I don’t think it (online school) will take it over (traditional school). I think it will definitely have a place,” she said. “I think, just like studies have shown that people are most productive when they have a combination schedule of working from home and going into the office, like 20 hours a week from home and 20 hours a week in the office, it’s going to be similar for school where there is just more splitting the schedule and kind of a combination.”

The Chandler Online Academy currently offers classes for any Arizona student in grades seven through 12, and Upchurch said they’ve taken awhile to implement the program because of funding and they wanted to be sure they did it the right way.

Like Primavera and the Mesa Distance Learning Program, students go through interactive lessons, have periodic appointments and check-ins with teachers every week, and go through what Upchurch calls, “direct instruction through the written form” by receiving lessons and feedback via e-mail or other means.

One of the criticisms of online school is a perception of having less academic integrity because students have access to the Internet for tests and assignments. The schools said they monitor cheating and plagiarism.

Upchurch said students are required to have an in-person, proctored final exam at a testing center.

But sometimes students aren’t able to accommodate that rule. In such instances, such as when one student was on a boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the exam has to be virtually proctored where students are monitored by a webcam and their screen is shared with the teacher.

Upchurch said they want to verify that the student is doing all the coursework.

Because these online programs are connected with public education, most students don’t have to pay tuition, depending on enrollment status. Textbooks are usually in a digital format and integrated into the curriculum with assignments.

As of April 2012, there were 52 Arizona State Board of Education approved Arizona Online Instruction programs according to a directory provided by Kristen Landry, spokeswoman for the Arizona Department of Education.

SOUTHERN STATES

Atlanta turns to online classes to boost graduation rates

ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

8/5/13

(Triple)

With nearly half of its students failing to graduate on time, Atlanta's school system turned to online education as one way to help.

The Atlanta Virtual Academy program won't solve the problem of students dropping out or falling behind, but it could slowly inch Atlanta Public Schools' 51 percent graduate rate upward.

About 100 high school students enrolled in the pilot program this summer, with 43 percent of those who were retaking classes earning passing grades. The school district considers that a win — those students are one step closer to graduation than they were before the online option.

This summer, rising junior Darius Brown spent a few hours every day at a computer retaking an algebra and geometry class he failed in the spring. Working remotely, he scored a B and stayed on track.

"I was worried about it because I wanted to graduate on time. I didn't want to be late," said Brown, who attends North Atlanta High School. "This was the first class I've failed, ever, so I wanted to make it up. I wanted to fix a past mistake and go on."

The online course fit Brown's needs because he said he was less distracted at his home desk than in a full classroom. Once he got into a routine of studying at 5:30 p.m. every day, he was able to absorb instruction at his own pace.

"The ultimate goal of any of our programs where we're giving kids the opportunity to gain credit is to increase graduation rates, period," said Doryiane Gunter, Atlanta Public Schools' program manager for virtual learning. "If a student is two credits short of being promoted to the next grade, or if a student has a scheduling conflict that prevents them from being promoted, this is another way for them to get it done."

Atlanta's online program is the newest in Georgia, but similar computer-based courses have been offered for years by the state and surrounding school districts including Gwinnett, DeKalb, Cobb, Henry, Cherokee and Rockdale counties. Atlanta Virtual Academy's enrollment is expected to grow in the fall semester, and more students have already signed up.

The online courses mirror the teachings of brick-and-mortar schools, with regular assignments, video lectures, group discussions and tests.

Teachers are available to answer questions, and the course software allows them to track whether students are spending enough time online. Students are expected to log on between 20 and 24 hours a week for a class during the summer, and between 12 and 15 hours a week during the longer semesters in the regular school year.

Across the country, the number of students learning online is rapidly growing, but research into the effectiveness of such classes is limited, said Tracy Gray, a managing director for the American Institutes for Research.

“Technology is like putting a piano in the room and expecting everybody to be (Frederic) Chopin,” Gray said. “Unless teachers know how to use the technology and the students have the necessary support they need to master the course content, then it can only go so far.”

A U.S. Department of Education study in 2010 concluded that online learning appears to be as effective as conventional classroom instruction.

Since July of last year, Georgia law has allowed students to choose whether to take free online courses from the state or their local districts, said Christina Clayton, director of instructional technology for the Georgia Department of Education, which oversees the Georgia Virtual School. This fall, about 20,000 students are expected to enroll in the state’s online courses, with about 8,000 of them seeking to recover credits from classes they’ve previously failed, and the rest taking new courses.

About 88 percent of students enrolled in the state’s credit recovery classes achieve passing grades, Clayton said. Instructional content in online courses is aligned with state standards, and students must pass end of course tests to prove their knowledge.

“We’ve been very successful in helping students who are bordering on being successful. That’s why we’re here — to make sure they can be,” she said.

One model for online instruction in Georgia is in Gwinnett County Public Schools, which started remote programs in 1999 that served about 3,000 students last school year. Since 2011, Gwinnett Online Campus has operated as a full-time charter school.

Students who have previously failed traditional classes tend to do well in online classes because they’ve already studied the content once, said Gwinnett Online Campus Principal Christopher Ray.

“It’s almost like an independent study,” Ray said. “You get out what you put into it. If you’re doing the work and working with a teacher, doing the assignments, you’re going to be successful.”

Enrollment in Hernando eSchool likely to double this year

TAMPA BAY TIMES

8/27/13

(Triple)

Thirteen-year-old Jenny Marty spent six years in the Hernando County School District's brick-and-mortar classrooms before leaving for the virtual ones. It's a change that fits her well.

"I really like taking the online courses because you get to work at your own pace," said Jenny, an eighth-grader, who noted that she used to struggle to keep up in school. "You don't have a lot of distractions."

She says her grades have improved. She feels like she's learning more. And she definitely recommends the online courses she has taken through Hernando eSchool, the district's virtual school.

She's one of a growing number.

The eSchool is on pace to double — and perhaps more than double — its enrollment for the 2013-14 school year, according to principal Debra Harris.

Now in its fourth year, the virtual school has students enrolled in roughly 1,850 semester long courses — a number that is continuing to grow, Harris said. For the entire 2012-13 school year, students took 2,411 courses.

Harris expects to see upward of 4,000 completed courses this year — some taken at home, others at schools.

"We're very, very pleased that we are busy," she said.

The announcement comes after news of layoffs at Florida Virtual School, which saw enrollment for August and September courses drop 32 percent from the previous year.

The likely culprit: new legislation that causes school districts to receive less state funding when a student signs up for Florida Virtual School or another provider other than the school district.

"That, beyond any doubt, impacted things," Harris said.

On average across Florida, she said, districts lose about \$480 per semester long class that students take through Florida Virtual School or an outside provider. In many cases, students take their online classes while at school, which means the district must provide computer time, supervision, technology and other services, Harris said.

But she thinks there's another reason for the increase in enrollment at the Hernando eSchool.

"I believe that we're doing a better job," she said. "We know our audience. We know our students. We have a stake in our community."

She added, "We're smaller, so we try harder."

The Hernando eSchool has been growing rapidly since it started during the 2010-11 school year.

The first year, the eSchool had 780 course completions. The next year, it had 1,401. For both years, the school served only grades 6 through 12.

For the 2012-13 year, the school added kindergarten through Grade 5. The number of completed courses jumped to 2,411.

Michael Provost, the eSchool's technical coordinator, has been with the virtual school for two years and said he has noticed a definite change in the acceptance of the school.

One major reason: the results.

"We score at the top — near the top — of the district, especially math and science," Provost said. "We really pay attention in our district to keeping kids on pace."

Rusty Drummond, a social studies teacher with the eSchool and a former Hernando High teacher of 15 years, agreed.

"I think the quality of the learning is probably equal or far exceeds that of a brick-and-mortar," Drummond said.

Parents are also starting to recognize the value of the courses for remediation and getting ahead in school.

The school has worked hard to battle misconceptions about what online schooling actually entails, namely that the course are easy, Provost said.

"It's rigorous," he said.

Former Creswell returns as virtual high school in fall

THE ADVOCATE, LA

7/7/13

(Triple)

Continual low test scores led to the closure of Creswell Elementary last month; however, the school will reopen in August as the site of a virtual high school and a second-chance program for over-aged fifth-graders.

As a way to prevent the takeover of Creswell by the Recovery School District for four consecutive years of low performance, the St. Landry Parish School System opted to close the school and rezone the students for nearby Park Vista Elementary, rated a B school based on state accountability standards.

The Creswell site will get a name change — the Center for Academic Programs — and serve students in grades seven through 12 in its virtual school program. The more-computerized instruction will be offered to 120 over-aged fifth-graders in the parish. The over-aged program enables students to complete the fifth and sixth grades in one year to catch up academically with their peers.

As of Thursday, none of the nearly 200 students of the now-closed Creswell have registered for classes, Park Vista principal Ulysse Joubert said.

The current enrollment at Park Vista is about 800.

Joubert said he's already hired seven teachers to join his staff of 44 teachers.

On Thursday, some teachers worked to prepare their classrooms, some located in a new classroom wing designed to replace older portable buildings on the campus.

With the expected increase in students, those older portables will be put to use, Joubert said.

Parents were notified of the closure in a letter that went home with students in May, and a town hall-style meeting with parents to discuss the transition to Park Vista is planned prior to the start of school on Aug. 16, Superintendent Edward Brown said.

No date for the meeting has been announced.

"We don't want to have any failing schools to start with and if we do, such as the case of Creswell, we want to make sure that we do everything in our power to make these students and our schools successful," Brown said.

In the 2011-12 school year, the school received a state performance score of 54.5 out of 200 and only 39 percent of all students were at or above grade level in English, while only 33 percent of all students were at or above grade level in math.

By comparison, Park Vista received a performance score of 108.2 to earn that B label, and 86 percent of its students are at or above grade level in English and 73 percent are at or above grade level in math.

Park Vista isn't preparing any unique educational services for the incoming Creswell students, Joubert said.

The school sets expectations for students and provides them the tools to meet them, he said.

"You don't make an issue out of Creswell. There are kids here from 17 different school zones. They're not singled out," Joubert said.

"Once here, they're Park Vista. There's no Creswell now. It's Park Vista. Now, we need people to register."

Those expectations don't change from child to child, fourth-grade Park Vista teacher Sydnie Thibodeaux said.

"I hold all of my kids to the same expectations," Thibodeaux said. "I believe every kid can achieve."

Joubert said he also is preparing for an influx of students previously zoned for Creswell who may have left the public school system or applied for transfers to other higher-performing schools. Those students now have the option to return to Park Vista.

Last year, Park Vista was the only public school in the state to participate in the voucher or school scholarship program that enabled students at low-performing schools to attend private schools or, in at least one case, a higher-performing public school.

The voucher program attracted 17 students from Acadia, St. Martin and Avoyelles parishes last year and so far, 37 students will attend Park Vista in the upcoming school year.

Last year, at least 106 out-of-zone St. Landry Parish students also attended Park Vista on school choice transfers that enabled them to attend a higher-performing school.

Joubert said 89 of the 106 students who transferred in from lower-performing schools in third through sixth grades had failed state standardized tests at their old schools; however, in their first year at Park Vista, 35 percent of those same students passed state standardized tests this year.

In Texas, Obama lauds ‘New Tech’ high school. Model for the future?

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

5/9/13

(Triple)

President Obama kicked off his “Middle Class Jobs & Opportunity Tour” Thursday with a visit to Manor New Tech High School in Manor, Texas, where he met some of the students that will help make up the 1 million new graduates he hopes to see in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) over the next decade.

The school is part of the nationwide New Tech Network (NTN), a nonprofit that works with 120 schools that exemplify many of the educational innovations the Obama administration has supported to better prepare students for college and modern-day careers.

“Our economy can’t succeed unless our young people have the skills that they need to succeed – and that’s what’s happening here,” Mr. Obama said to a gathering of students, teachers, and dignitaries at Manor.

NTN schools, 90 percent of which are in public districts, are built around student-centered projects that have real-world connections to local businesses and nonprofits. Digital tools are integrated into everyday learning: Instead of textbooks, students carry around laptops or tablets. When students graduate, they already have college credits under their belt.

The network provides a “model of how to prepare students for the world they are coming into,” says Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Stanford University, because students master the top skills in demand in Fortune 500 companies today: “teamwork, problem-solving, and interactive communication.”

Unlike the old model, where vocational education was a separate track from college-prep, Ms. Darling-Hammond says, “students in New Tech are simultaneously prepared for college and careers... They say, ‘We learn math because we see how it’s applied... and we understand it more deeply.’ ”

The schools, currently in 18 states, reach a diverse group of students. Most of Manor New Tech students, for instance, qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and most of them go on to become first-generation college students.

NTN students graduate at a rate 6 percent higher than the national average. They also enroll and persist more in college. At 2-year colleges, for instance, they stay enrolled at a rate 46 percent higher than the national average.

“Every day, this school is proving that every child has the potential to learn the real-world skills they need to succeed in college and beyond,” Obama said, after meeting students who were studying how earthworms regenerate and using math to build musical instruments and robots. “You’re doing things a little differently around here than a lot of high schools, and it’s working,” he said.

The ubiquity of computers and online access at the schools is not about technology for technology’s sake, says NTN president Lydia Dobyms. “Without the context and the training, simply providing laptops or iPads is highly unlikely to change the outcomes for students.”

Teachers at network schools, particularly at Manor, “exemplify what can happen when teachers work in a collaborative, transformative way,” Ms. Dobyms says.

Their broader goal is to foster deep learning, measured in part by the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA) – which looks at analytical reasoning, writing effectiveness, writing mechanics, and problem-solving. NTN students gain 75 percent more points between freshman and senior year than their peers in other schools who take the CWRA.

Teachers in the network have used Facebook and Twitter to teach social-media responsibility. They’ve engaged students in civics by having them create their own political parties and campaign videos, culminating in an online debate among the top candidates from the schools in the network, according to an Education Week blog by Tom Vander Ark, a consultant on education reform and managing partner of Learn Capital.

The network offers an online platform where students and teachers can collaborate, and where multiple schools can share resources and successful project ideas.

Students at Manor have participated in robotics contests, worked on projects with the company Samsung, and tapped the website Rally.org to raise money for everything from prom to a roller derby team.

The first New Tech high school started in Napa, Calif., in 1996. Among graduates of that school, 43 percent have entered STEM careers, says Matt Williams, a spokesman for KnowledgeWorks, the nonprofit that oversees NTN.

With the help of federal grants such as Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation (i3), some states have integrated NTN schools into their plans for improving both education and economic development. Indiana, for instance, now has 23 network schools.

Obama’s April budget contained a proposal for a \$300 million High School Redesign competitive grant program for districts that partner with colleges, businesses, and nonprofits to develop the skills needed for future jobs.

He used his visit to Manor Thursday to once again push for such initiatives, as well as his proposals to expand high quality preschool opportunities and help make college more affordable.

How much financial support he can really throw behind such educational initiatives will depend on the real budget that Congress eventually passes.

But whether Obama gets all the dollars he wants or not, schools – and even some whole school districts such as in Sacramento, Calif. – that follow principles similar to those of the New Tech Network are springing up all around the country “because the workforce is demanding these skills,” says Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education in Washington, which promotes improvements in high schools.

“One CEO said to me, ‘We don’t hire people for what they know but for what they can do with what they know,’ ” says Mr. Wise, the former governor of West Virginia.