

The Intelligencer

Opinion

Guest Opinion: Legislation would put an end to cyber charter waste

By Dr. Bill Harner

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The gasoline for America's economic engine and national security is the quality of its workforce. When the vast majority of workers are the product of K12 public schools, the quality of public education is the linchpin to sustaining our way of life.

In Pennsylvania, more than \$30 billion is spent on K12 public education annually to create a future ready workforce. Though nearly \$17 billion comes from local taxpayers, many decisions on how that \$30 billion must be spent is made in Harrisburg through unfunded mandates! Where money is involved, politics and self-interest interferes with developing the ultimate education model that is both effective and efficient for students and taxpayers. It also compromises the creation of a future-ready workforce. This is the case in the funding of cyber charter schools.

Pennsylvania makes up more than 20 percent of the total cyber charter school student population in America. This year, PA school districts will send more than \$500 million to 14 cyber charter schools that have no accountability to an elective body or taxpayer oversight.

Funding for the 33,857 students attending a cyber charter school in PA depends on the per-student cost of the sending school district. For example, for a Quakertown student attending a cyber charter, we send \$14,745 per regular education student, and \$30,424 per special education student. If a Lower Merion student attended the same cyber charter, their cost would be significantly higher — \$20,358 per regular education and \$53,756 per student with a disability. More evidence of a profit motive: 25 percent of former Quakertown regular education students who withdraw from the district to attend a cyber charter “become” special education students after they transfer.

These are outrageous costs, especially given that it only costs Quakertown \$2,000 per student to enroll in our own cyber/online program. That is why cyber charters in PA have exorbitant fund balances. On average their reserves are 21 percent of their total operating budgets. PA Cyber Charter has a 37 percent fund balance. What would a cyber school be needing with \$48 million from taxpayers sitting in a bank? To sustain their for-profit business model!

To compound the problem, every cyber charter school in Pennsylvania has been identified as failing under the former PA School Performance Profile. Two national studies, one by the Rand Corporation and the other from the Center for Education Outcomes of Stanford University, found troubling results. The Stanford study said the shortfall for most cyber students was equal to losing 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days in math during the typical 180-day school year. Terribly scary!

Even the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools has distanced itself from cyber charter schools. The NAPCS is telling policy makers in state capitals it's the legislature's responsibility to change their state's cyber education model.

Fortunately, after years of intentional neglect by the PA Legislature, there is an opportunity now for bipartisanship to correct the wasteful spending on cyber charter schools and return money to taxpayers. State Sen. Judy Schwank, D-Berks County, and State Rep. Curt Sonney, R-Erie, have sponsored twin bills — SB34 and HB 526 — to protect public education cyber students and Pennsylvania taxpayers. If passed, school districts who have their own cyber/online programs to be fully responsible for cyber education of ALL public school students within their district. This makes perfect dollars and sense.

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