

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Cyber charter schools growing in popularity

Gov. Tom Corbett has called for innovation, competition and choice in our education system. The following is one of a series of articles about different approaches to education.

Yesterday I discussed how Linda Reinhart of Oley homeschooled her four children over a 20-year period, finding her own curriculum and tutors, and partnering with other homeschoolers for shared activities.

Parents who wish to homeschool today have the option of enrolling their children in one of 11 cyber charter schools approved by the state Department of Education.

Students work out of their own homes, supervised by their parents. The cyber school provides textbooks, workbooks, a computer, and Internet service. It costs parents nothing. The student's home school district pays the cyber charter school a fee equal to 80 percent of the cost of educating its own students. The Pottstown School District pays cyber schools \$9,300 for each student enrolled and \$27,533 for each special education student enrolled.

Since the first cyber charter school opened in 2000, enrollments statewide have grown to more than 23,000 students in grades K through 12. About 80 Pottstown students are currently getting their education online from eight cyber charter schools.

Last fall, Michael and Janet Schutt enrolled their son, Eddie, who had attended Pottstown's Lincoln Elementary School through fourth grade, for fifth grade in the Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School. The school is based in Norristown, but its teachers work from their homes throughout Pennsylvania, communicating with their students by phone and through the Internet.

Janet made the commitment to be Eddie's "learning coach," assuring that he logs into his online school every day just as if he was attending a bricks-and-mortar school.

The Schutts received a laptop, printer and school books through the mail. Eddie took a diagnostic test online to assess his reading and math abilities. With that information, the Virtual Charter School then tailored an individualized schedule for him.

Eddie starts each school day with a computer program called Blackboard, which provides him with a daily update of school events and other timely information.

Blackboard lists the lessons Eddie has scheduled for the day and the estimated time it takes to complete each one. He can also look at his schedule for the week and the

entire school year.

Eddie can attend virtual classrooms using a computer program called Elluminate. Just as a teacher writes lessons on a blackboard in a real classroom, the teacher writes lessons each child sees simultaneously on his computer. Students can raise their hand to answer questions by clicking a mouse. The teacher calls on a student by activating his microphone so he can speak to the others.

Although there are scheduled classes during the week, Eddie takes most of the lessons on his own with his mother's help, using workbooks and readers — even science kits — provided by the school. Eddie's work is recorded on the computer at the end of each day, so teachers can monitor his progress.

Eddie takes frequent assessment tests. If he doesn't pass, he studies the material again. He can take as much time as he needs to learn the concept. On the other hand, if he demonstrates mastery of a concept, he can skip the lesson and move on to the next one.

"That's one of the things we like best about the program," Janet said. "Eddie can learn at his own pace, and he never gets left behind. Tutors are available by phone. You can call the teacher any time, even in the evening, and they are always ready to help you."

Another aspect the Schutts like is field trips. The charter school has organizers throughout the state who arrange numerous field trips for parents and students. Although they are voluntary, the Schutts generally take at least three a month, most recently to such places as a helicopter factory, the Graeme Park historic site, and Longwood Gardens.

The field trips allow Eddie to interact with other students. Parents get to meet one another. After the students met in person, one set up a cyber network similar to Facebook so they can talk and write to each other.

Like all public school students, Eddie must take PSSAs, which are scheduled at sites throughout the state. Eddie will take his at Beulah Land in Sanatoga. Last year, the charter school made AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) in all categories.

Like all schools, cyber schools rely heavily on parental involvement for success. But they offer exciting new ways for children to learn. Many of their techniques can and should be adopted in traditional schools.

Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not the board's.



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