

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Charter school boondoggle

Last week, we discussed how the number of students diagnosed with disabilities — and thus needing expensive special education services — has skyrocketed in recent decades. This is the main reason why the inflation-adjusted cost of public education, per student, has nearly tripled since the 1970s.

Another reason for mushrooming costs is charter schools.

Public schools were established by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1834. For more than 150 years, parents had two choices: They could send their children to their local public schools or they could pay to send them to private schools.

But in 1997, the legislature created a third choice — charter schools. Parents could send their children to individually-managed charter schools and the taxpayers would pick up the tab.

To be feasible, “bricks and mortar” charter schools have to be within commuting distance of the child’s home.

But “cyber” charter schools have no such constraints. Students interact with their teachers and classmates remotely using computers and the internet. Students and teachers can be located anywhere in the commonwealth, but payment is made by the district where the student resides.

Currently, about 9 percent of Pennsylvania students — 141,000 — are enrolled in charter schools (about 190 from Pottstown).

If a student is classified as having “special needs” of any kind, the charter school receives about three times as much tuition, per pupil, as a regular education student.

This encourages charter schools to over-diagnose students, because the charter

school gets as much money for a child with a mild disability as it does for a severely handicapped child (not that it would accept one).

Now that Pottstown has gone virtual this year because of the pandemic, we are bringing increasing numbers of special education students into our schools at least part of the week for in-person interaction to meet their needs.

You have to wonder how a special education student in a cyber charter school can receive extra help.

Now that all school districts have developed their own virtual programs, and have experience running them, is there any justification left for cyber charter schools?

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board’s.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Pottstown School District payments to charter schools 2018-2019

	Regular Ed	Special Ed
Cost per student	\$11,212	\$32,878
Agora Cyber Charter	\$322,878	\$295,529
Pa. Virtual Charter	\$203,165	\$54,326
Commonwealth Charter	\$263,516	\$191,409
Pa. Cyber Charter	\$118,156	\$73,415
Pa. Leadership Charter	\$90,811	\$224,179
Pa. Distance Learning	\$46,785	\$68,205
Susq. Cyber Charter	\$2,578	
Reach Cyber Charter	\$196,597	\$164,793
Insight Pa. Cyber	\$79,230	\$11,061
Collegium Charter	\$27,057	
21st Century Cyber	\$53,472	\$34,466
Achievement House	\$16,046	\$28,891
Renaissance Academy	\$434,862	\$230,260
TOTAL	\$1,855,581	\$1,382,773

CLERICAL NIGHTMARE — The Pottstown School District must pay each charter school that a Pottstown student attends. Tuition for any student with a disability, however mild, is nearly triple that for a regular education student.