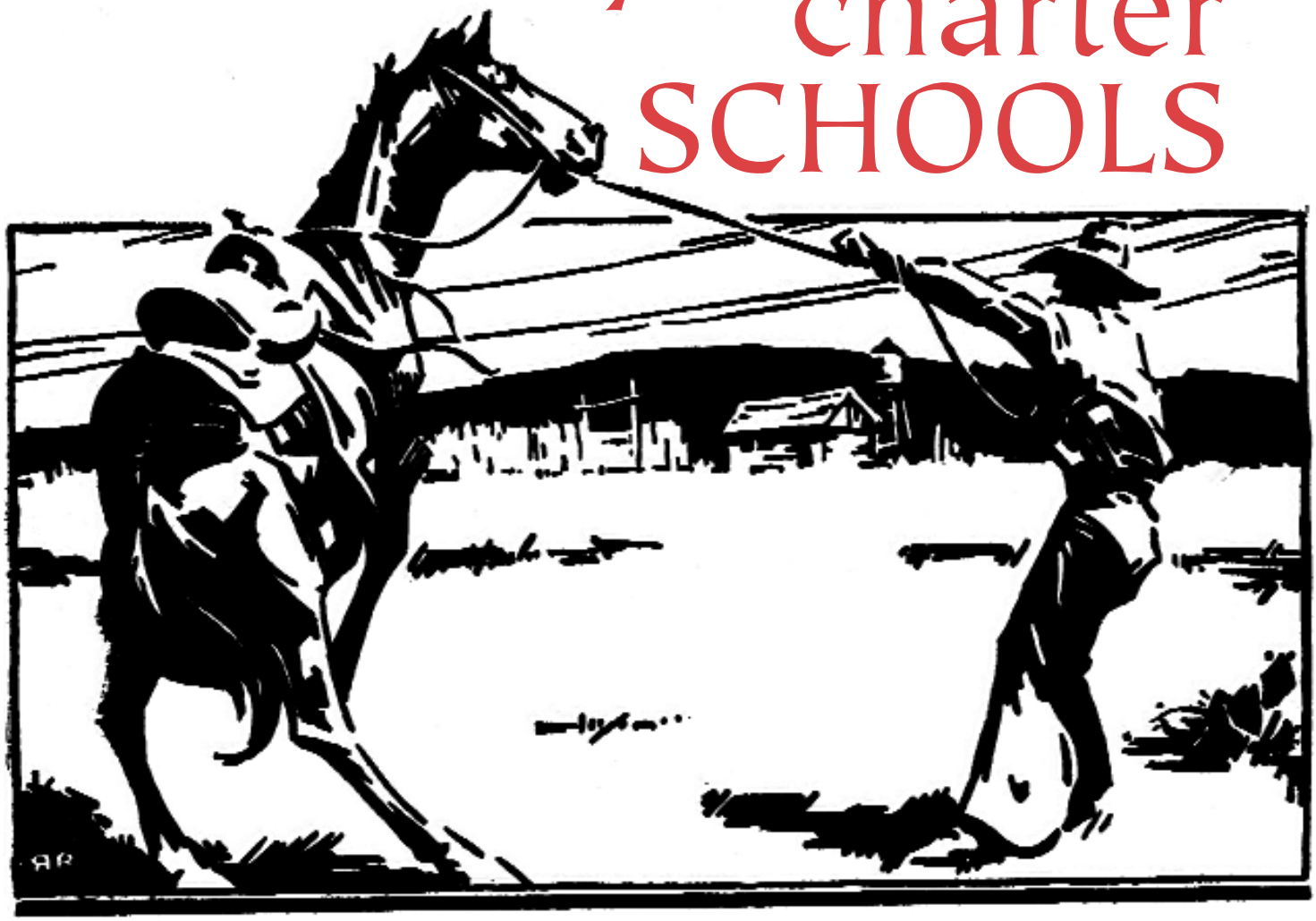
online autonomy

cyber charter SCHOOLS



a new breed in the education corral

a riddle

What do you get when you cross a charter school with an Internet-based "virtual" school?

answer: *A distinct hybrid, a dynamic new species that displays its own personality, reveals novel abilities, forages in unfamiliar pastures, confounds budget models, and poses fresh challenges to education policymakers everywhere.*

The recently coined phrase "cyber charter school" is often heard in policy circles, but few education leaders seem to appreciate just how novel this new education model is. Recent personal interactions with state policymakers suggest that few of those who are familiar with the charter school concept fully appreciate the important differences between online and "brick-and-mortar" schools—and the policy implications of these differences.

In addition to independent governance and freedom from many education regulations, cyber charter schools are also largely free of the shackles of geographic boundaries and rigid daily schedules. Apart from the obvious difference that such

by James Bogden

schools don't use buildings or transport kids in buses, they represent a truly new species of school in the following ways:

- **Serving more kinds of students:** Online education can serve entire classes of students that ordinary public and charter schools do not—students who live in remote areas, those who are homebound for health reasons, professional athletes and entertainers, students who are incarcerated, young parents, and employed students who need flexible schedules.

  Cyber charters can also provide additional options to other students who for a range of reasons do not "fit" well in traditional schools, such as students with serious behavior problems or highly creative students who have difficulty conforming to traditional classes and scheduling. One cyber charter high school in Philadelphia actively recruits gay and lesbian students who often feel socially ostracized in regular schools.[1]

- **Offering true innovation:** Cyber charter schools can serve students who want to accelerate or enrich their education, who want to move at their own pace or learn at odd hours, or who want programs tailored to particular cultural backgrounds. For example, one school offers the option of studying Arabic through an online learning program with an academy in Egypt.[2]

  Students can quickly access complex websites that contain sophisticated graphics and animation, audio explanations, multiple layers of information, interactive exercises, and hyperlinks to other sites containing information needed to solve problems. Online instructional programs can include continuous diagnostic assessment of knowledge and skill development with immediate feedback to the learner. Students with different learning styles can benefit from the mode of instruction that best fit their unique needs. Cyber charters can offer multiple curriculum choices from a growing number of third-party providers and can even personalize the pace and content of instruction for individual students.

  Virtual schooling opens up scheduling flexibility and creative options for teachers, as well.

- **Blurring the boundary between home and school:** Cyber charter schools employ teachers, counselors, and technicians to provide instructional guidance and support services, yet most schools also rely heavily on parents to monitor students' activities, provide on-site instructional support, and certify their child's "attendance."

  Recent advances in hardware, software, and telecommunications that allow quality learning materials to be

How Does a Cyber School Work?

Operationally, most cyber schools supply students with a computer and instructional materials and pay the telecommunications costs. Students work at their own pace so long as they meet predetermined assignment deadlines.

A "learning management system" (LMS) provides the software through which courses are delivered from the virtual school to the student all within one website or portal. Typically, the LMS contains space for the teacher to offer descriptive information about the course (goals, objectives, expected outcomes), and to post the course syllabus, assignments, and reading material. It also provides the mechanism by which students can submit assignments for review and grading by the instructor.

There is often also a notice board on which students and instructor can engage in asynchronous threaded discussions (that is, not everyone is participating at the same time), and sometimes a chat room where synchronous conversation can occur (everyone *is* participating at the same time). The LMS also provides hyperlinks to resources of use to the student such as libraries, additional reading materials, and websites.

The amount of time students actually spend on the Internet can vary widely, from 20 percent to 80 percent, with the youngest students spending the least amount of time online.[xv] Some virtual schools rely heavily on offline textbooks and worksheets. Parents are typically expected to supervise their child's school work, particularly in the elementary and middle grades. Yet teachers at the best virtual schools spend a great deal of time interacting one-on-one with students—as much as a third of their time—either by e-mail or phone.

Assessment is usually accomplished by a combination of online and offline tests. Students might be required to submit writing samples and portfolios. Some states require students of virtual schools to travel to certain sites to take standardized state assessments.

Cyber charter schools often contract with local school districts, YMCAs, and other organizations to provide students with physical education, art, music, and co-curricular activities.

Virtual schooling is certainly not for everyone, however. Unless a parent is providing constant supervision, students need a degree of personal motivation and self-discipline to pursue a somewhat independent course of study. Rates of students not completing courses are typically high.

accessible at home via the Internet have greatly benefited the roughly 850,000 students[3] being schooled at home. Cyber charter schools offer homeschooling families the attractive option of public financing for a home-based education program that relieves parents of much of the instructional burden, at little cost of loss of autonomy. Two-thirds of the students of one Pennsylvania cyber charter school were formerly homeschooled.[4] Many cyber charter schools focus their student recruitment efforts among homeschoolers.

These are students whose educational costs were not previously covered by public dollars. Cyber charter school enrollments can represent unexpected (and unwelcome) new obligations to public education budgets. Colorado's charter school law specifically bans online schools from enrolling students who previously were taught at home or attended a private school.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) counts some 57 cyber charter schools operating in thirteen states in the 2002-2003 school year.[5] In most cases, these schools are operating under charter school laws that were not designed to address the unique issues raised by Internet-based schooling. Experience is showing that the following are the most crucial policy issues that state education leaders need to deal with:

- **Geographic boundaries become irrelevant:** Unless a state has an "open enrollment" policy, students are typically required to enroll in schools in their local school district.[6] Similarly, charter schools in most states receive funding through the school districts in which they are located under the assumption that their students are drawn from that district's regular schools. Yet by their very nature, cyber charter schools have the capacity to enroll students beyond a district's boundaries (theoretically, even beyond state and national borders).

  This dilemma was at the heart of Pennsylvania's well-publicized legal dispute in 2001.[7] Districts where cyber schools were based worried about being held responsible for out-of-district students they could not physically monitor. Meanwhile, districts across the state were being required to provide per-pupil payments for students who were no longer under their supervision. In response, Pennsylvania adopted legislation that reimburses public school districts up to 30 percent of the per-student funding lost when area students enroll in cyber charters, and requires the state department of education to hold cyber charters accountable for curriculum standards, special education plans, school attendance, and personal instruction.

- **Determining an appropriate per-pupil allocation:** Despite the high costs associated with advanced learning technologies and program development expenses, online education can cost substantially less to operate because it is not necessary to build and maintain a bricks-and-mortar school building, transportation and food services are not provided, and classes can have higher student/teacher ratios. The size of a school's enrollment and the range of educational options and support services offered can significantly affect per-pupil operating costs, which can range from $2,900 to over $7,000 per student.[8]

  Politically, school districts may balk at seeing "their" funds "unfairly" diverted to a lower-cost provider. Opposition to cyber charter schools can be intense ("Help us stop this illegal drain on your district funds!"[9]). State officials have been concerned that some cyber charter school operators have been running minimal educational programs, letting parents do most of the work while taking the full state allocation.

  California legislators addressed this problem by giving the state board of education the authority to determine appropriate funding levels of "non-classroom-based" charter schools on a case-by-case basis. A May, 2003 Policy Brief from ECS summarizes how California, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Ohio have wrestled in different ways with the funding issue.[10] Another issue raised by ECS is whether to distribute a portion of education technology funding to cyber charters. Nothing is settled: the debate continues.

- **Establishing measures and procedures for accountability and oversight:** Accountability for student performance can be difficult to measure and enforce among charter schools in general. Additional challenges with cyber charters include assuring quality of instructional materials and methods, confirming enrollment figures, accounting for students' required instructional hours ("seat time"), and authenticating that students themselves, not their parents, are doing the schoolwork and taking the tests. Most cyber charters contract with for-profit operators of online courses and charges of corruption and conflict of interest have occasionally surfaced. A major study of seven Pennsylvania cyber charter schools, conducted by KPMG Consulting in 2001, found that the quality of instruction and the degree of student support varied considerably.[11]

  Online education in general raises many questions about its effectiveness, issues that were explored at length by the 2001 NASBE Study Group on e-Learning.[12] States need to implement measures to assure that those who authorize and monitor cyber charter schools ensure that the

Other Virtual School Models

One of the most remarkable aspects of virtual schools—charter or otherwise—is the speed with which variations on the theme have emerged, which to some extent blurs the line between cyber charters and other virtual schools. So far, in addition to cyber charters, there are five that are clearly discernable types:

- **State-Level Schools**: The first of the state-sanctioned, state-level virtual schools was established by Florida in 1997. By 2001 at least 13 additional states had such schools (Michigan, Arkansas, Illinois, Alabama, Utah, Louisiana, New Mexico, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maryland, North Dakota, West Virginia, and Idaho). Funding and administrative structures vary considerably among these schools.

- **College and University-Based Virtual Schools**: This category is typified by the University of Nebraska Independent High School, which has developed 34 web-based high school courses as part of a complete online high school curriculum. In July 1999, a for-profit company, CLASS.com, Inc., was created to market these high-quality courses. Other major universities developing online diploma programs include the University of Missouri, University of Indiana, University of Texas, and Brigham Young University.

- **Consortium and Regionally Based Virtual Schools**: The best known of these is the Concord Virtual High School, founded in 1997 by the Hudson (Massachusetts) Public Schools and the Concord Consortium. It is now operated by the nonprofit VHS Inc. An interesting feature of VHS is that it barters for courses. Any school across the country that contributes an online course receives enrollment for 20 of its students in the school's more than 100 courses. Other schools following this model include the Cyberschool in Eugene, Oregon and the Colorado Online School Consortium. In addition, there is the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium and, in the Southwest, AP Nexus and the Western Consortium for Accelerated Learning Opportunities are regional consortia of state governments.

- **Local Education Agency-Based Virtual Schools**: Mainly to supplement or provide alternative education for local students, some school districts have established virtual schools. A notable example is the HISD Virtual School in Houston, Texas. Its middle school curriculum was originally intended to lower dropout rates among students in traditional schools, but it has also become a vehicle for preparing students for rigorous high school courses. It is free to both in-school and homeschool students in the district, and was viewed by Rod Paige, then superintendent of the Houston ISD, as an important means of bringing homeschool students back into the system.

- In addition, there is now an emerging **private sector presence**, most notably K12 Inc., in virtual charter schools. K12 is a for-profit corporation established in 1999 by former U.S. Education Secretary, William Bennett. It provides services to individual homeschoolers, but its main thrust is to establish contracts with states to serve their homeschoolers. Currently, K12 offers curriculum—more than 600 lessons per grade— plus computer and at-home learning materials and teaching guides for students in kindergarten through 5th grade, and it is expanding its curriculum upward toward grade 12. State clients include Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

(Adapted from the "Homeschooling Update," by Lucy Wells Hausner. Alexandria, VA: NASBE (in press).

schools employ instructional and assessment methods that reflect best practices. Unfortunately, there is no set of agreed upon standards for virtual education against which the performance of cyber charter schools can be measured.

A good start in this direction is the *Guide to Online High School Courses,* developed by the National Education Association (NEA) with the assistance of NASBE and several other organizations, to identify practices and characteristics that are most likely to lead to effective education.[13] Experience demonstrates, for example, that online programs need a great deal of interaction between instructor and student; that both students and educators need sufficient preparation to succeed; and that the overall infrastructure must be sound both technologically and pedagogically. Unfortunately, bodies of evidence for best practices at the middle and elementary school levels, or for entire online schools as opposed to courses, have not yet emerged to the point where similar consensus guides can be written.

As part of its 2001 study, KPMG Consulting conducted a benchmarking study of six cyber charter schools from around the nation to identify best practices in charter school governance, accountability structures, high-quality distance learning models, and financial benchmarks. Their analysis, however, focused on school-level practices and does not provide a comprehensive roadmap for state policies regarding accountability and oversight.

Pennsylvania's Revised Cyber Charter School Application

As with any school's application for a charter, a cyber charter school is required to demonstrate that it can meet its enrollment, provide a quality education program, and meet the same rules and regulations governing all charter schools in the state (e.g., student testing, records, safety, civil rights, special education, truancy, student withdrawal). In addition, a cyber charter school must explain how much on-line time will be required, how teachers will deliver instruction and interact with their students via on-line methods, what equipment will be provided and/or required, how the school day will be defined, what technical support will be provided, how privacy will be maintained, and what methods will be used to ensure authenticity of student work.[16]

For the time being, states will need to experiment with developing appropriate regulatory systems.[14] The essential challenge is to effectively assure these schools' quality without inhibiting their exciting innovations, or raising new barriers to the participation of nontraditional students who benefit most from this new form of schooling.

The still-to-be-answered question for policymakers: How to corral this new breed without breaking its spirit?

James Bogden is project director of the Safe and Healthy Schools Project at NASBE.

1. DiGiacomo, Robert, "Cyber Charter School Welcomes LGBT Students," *Philadelphia Gay News,* December 12, 2001. Excerpted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Internet: http://www.glsen.org/templates/news/record.html?section=12&record=1108.
2. Lips, Dan. "School Choice: Right for America," Cato Institute, 2001. Internet: http://www.cato.org/research/education/articles/schoice.html.
3. Bielick, Stacey; Kathryn Chandler; and Stephen Broghman, "Homeschooling in the United States: 1999." NCES Technical Report, 2001-033, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Internet: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001033.
4. KPMG Consulting. "Cyber Charter Schools Review," October 30, 2001. Internet: http://www.pde.state.pa.us/charter_schools/cwp/view.asp?a=3&Q=75169.
5. Anderson, Amy Berk, "Cyber Charter Schools," *Policy Brief*, Education Commission of the States, May 2003. Internet: http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/44/13/4413.htm.
6. National Conference of State Legislatures, "Cyber Charter Schools: Virtual Education for the 21st Century," Education program session notes (undated). Internet: http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/CyberChartSch.htm.
7. Trotter, Andrew, "Cyber Schools Carving Out Charter Niche," *Education Week*, October 24, 2001. Internet: http://www.edweek.org/ew/newstory.cfm?slug=08cyber.h21.
Fletcher, Michael A., "Rocky Start in 'Cyber' Classrooms: Pa. School Districts' Resistance Slows Online Charter Schools," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2002. Internet: http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A1935-2002Feb25&notFound=true.
8. KPMG Consulting, 2001. The report goes into some depth to explain this range of costs.
9. New York State School Boards Association, "Call to Action: NY Virtual Charter School Application: Help Us Stop this Illegal Drain on Your District Funds!" (undated). Internet: http://www.nyssba.org/advocacy/nyvirtual-school-app.htm.
10. Anderson, 2003.
11. KPMG Consulting, 2001.
12. Bogden, James, *Any Time, Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace: Taking the Lead on e-Learning Policy,* National Association of State Boards of Education, October 2001. Internet: http://www.nasbe.org/e_Learning.html.
13. Stein, Barbara, "Standards for Online High Schools Courses," *State Education Standard*, National Association of State Boards of Education, Summer 2002. Internet: http://www.nasbe.org/Standard/10_Summer2002/fulton.pdf. See also National Education Association, *Guide to Online High School Courses*, 2002. Internet: http://www.nea.org/technology/distanceed/highschool/02onlinecourses.pdf
14. The journal of the National School Boards Association (NSBA) laid out some critical issues for local schools boards that serve as cyber charter school authorizers. See Payne, Edward J., "Whose Student Is It, Anyway?" *American School Board Journal*, September 2002. Internet: http://www.asbj.com/specialreports/2002pdf/0902pdf/Sept02ASBJS2b2.pdf.
15. KPMG Consulting, 2001.
16. Summarized by Anderson, 2003. The actual application can be found at http://www.pde.state.pa.us/charter_schools/lib/charter_schools/2002charterapp.pdf.