

3 new e-schools OK'd after state ban is lifted

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By [Bill Bush](#)

For the first time in eight years, the number of Internet charter schools in Ohio will expand after the state legislature lifted a moratorium on creating new e-schools.

The legislature allowed the state school superintendent to approve up to five new e-schools this year, and he approved three to open this fall: Mosaica Online Academy, Provost Academy and Insight School.

The new operations will join 23 e-schools in serving about 40,000 Ohio students in kindergarten through the 12th grade.

“Like everything, these organizations grow organically,” said James Lang, head of the new Mosaica Online Academy, which has 25 students set to begin classes Sept. 3. Lang expects to have 100 students by the end of the school year and is optimistic that it could enroll 1,000 within three years.

The legislature enacted the moratorium in 2005 so that the state Department of Education could develop standards for charter schools. The state wrestled with questions such as how to accurately keep attendance for students who work from home, how many hours each day a student should be engaged and how many students a teacher should be responsible for teaching.

Ohio law first called for the creation of standards in 2003, but the legislature took no action on the proposals submitted, said Department of Education spokesman John Charlton. The budget bill from 2011 called for standards by 2012, which the governor and state school superintendent delivered to the legislature. But lawmakers didn't adopt those standards, so a backup set — written by an association whose members include online charter schools — became Ohio's standards on Jan. 1, Charlton said.

Those standards, from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, differ from those submitted by the governor and state superintendent in that they make no mention of attendance-keeping or budgeting.

The standards that the legislature rejected said that students had to have functioning hardware and software before they could be considered enrolled in an e-school and that attendance policies must ensure that enrolled students are “engaged.” They also called for schools to have a process for what actions to take when students fail to participate, and truancy policies that

“enforce compulsory education laws.” An e-school’s sponsor would be required to “have a budget which allocates sufficient resources” to support the school.

It’s telling that after a decade of trying to establish standards for e-schools, Ohio ended up relying on standards drafted by a group funded in part by Ohio e-schools, said Stephen Dyer, an education policy fellow for liberal research group Innovation Ohio and a former Democratic state representative from northeastern Ohio.

“Whenever there’s an expansion of e-schools in Ohio, it’s going to be particularly troublesome,” Dyer said, because Ohio pays twice as much per-pupil to e-schools than some other states, “and frankly, we haven’t had a great track record with e-schools in Ohio.”

Ohio’s largest e-school, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, or ECOT, enrolls more than 13,700 students statewide. Nick Wilson, vice president of marketing and communications for ECOT, said the school has no stance on the elimination of the moratorium. ECOT is rated a C on its 2011-12 state report card, meeting four of 26 standards.

“Seeing the growth of our school over the past 15 years shows that there is definitely a demand for online education throughout the state,” Wilson said.

The desire to have “a handle on everything about” digital education led to the moratorium, from determining what is the appropriate student-teacher ratio at an e-school to what is the right per-pupil payment, said Bill Sims, president of the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

As it stands today, Ohio pays on average \$7,300 per pupil per year to charters, including extra payments for special-education students. Each e-school student must be assigned to a “teacher of record” who is responsible for the overall academic development of the student; that teacher can have up to 125 students assigned to him or her.

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