



Whistleblower's Allegations Raise Questions About Charter School Spending

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By **JIM LETIZIA & OHIO PUBLIC RADIO**

The state spends 900 million dollars on charter schools.

Claims that there are hundreds of truant students at one online charter school are raising questions about whether charters are getting more money than they should. Ohio Public Radio's Karen Kasler reports.

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There have always been concerns about how the state can count the students they'll pay for in online charter schools when there's no way to do a physical head count in a classroom. This week an anonymous e-mail went to two state lawmakers that claimed 402 students were truant for months at Ohio Virtual Academy – with only 14 of them disenrolled from the school. That could mean the state is paying for 388 kids who aren't in school. Those lawmakers are investigating the claims and the source of the e-mail. Kristin Stewart is the head of schools at Ohio Virtual Academy. She said those 402 students were just identified as being at risk of being truant, and says the allegations aren't true. "Absolutely, 100% not," Stewart said.

But a recording of a conference call being circulated to Ohio reporters brings up that question again. The call from April 6 is a team meeting for an advisor group from Ohio Virtual Academy, and one person on the tape is heard telling the others that no more truancy withdrawals will be approved. Two advisors are heard asking what they should do with truant students who haven't been logging in and have failing grades, and whether a truant student should be re-enrolled for next year. Kristin Stewart says she's aware the conference call was recorded and shared with reporters, and says students who go 105 consecutive hours without logging in are considered truant under state law and eligible to be kicked out. "We have withdrawn approximately 90, a

little over 90 since April 6,” said Stewart. “So obviously that ‘April 6 – absolutely none’ was passed.”

But Stewart says the school doesn’t like to do withdrawals this late in the year because she’s found kids don’t go to other schools and simply drop out. So she says the school keeps students who might be truant but have extenuating circumstances enrolled, while officials try to reach out to them. Ohio Virtual Academy gets almost \$85 million from the Ohio Department of Education – that money comes from the public school districts that their students would attend based on their home address. The Ohio Department of Education confirms that charter schools get paid on enrollment, not on attendance, student performance or graduation rates. Each charter school comes up with its own policy on how and when hours must be completed, says John Charlton at the Ohio Department of Education – with an emphasis on flexibility. “The reason community schools are there, so they can be more creative and more innovative and do things differently than traditional public schools,” Charlton said. “If we make them follow all the same rules that traditional public schools follow, then what are they? Traditional public schools. And we don’t want them to be traditional public schools. We want them to be creative and innovative and help kids.”

Charter school advocates aren’t convinced. Steven Dyer with the liberal-leaning group Innovation Ohio has worked with the state’s largest teachers union on the website knowyourcharter.com. Dyer says cases like this raise big trust issues with the charter school system. “It would be one thing if we were having a few attendance issues and they were blowing the doors off of student achievement,” said Dyer. “The fact is, they’re among the worst performing schools in the state; they’re getting paid a lot of money, and they’re dragging down the entire charter sector.”

Charlton won’t comment specifically on Ohio Virtual Academy, but says the state expects charters to keep accurate records that the state will confirm, and he says when there’s a problem, he says the organization that sponsors the charter is alerted to give the sponsor and the school an opportunity to fix the problem. And Charlton says the Department of Education is has launched a sponsor evaluation system that will offer incentives for sponsors with schools that do well, and punishments for those with schools that don’t.

Original audio: <http://wcbe.org/post/whistleblowers-allegations-raise-questions-about-charter-school-spending>