



Kalamazoo, Michigan

Cyberschools would receive funding under Michigan Senate proposal; critics raise concerns

October 24, 2011

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KALAMAZOO — When supporters of cyberschools talk about changing Michigan law to fund the schools' expansion, they point to states such as Ohio and Pennsylvania, where thousands of students are enrolled in virtual charter schools.

"We're behind the curve," said state [Sen. Phil Pavlov](#), R-St. Clair Township, chairman of the Senate Education Committee. Cyberschools — schools that operate online — offer "a powerful way to deliver learning in the 21st century," he said.

Pavlov is an advocate for Senate Bill 619, which would lift current restrictions on cyberschools in Michigan and allow the programs to receive the same per-student foundation allowances as traditional public schools.

Ironically, cyberschool skeptics also point to Ohio and Pennsylvania as reasons for their caution.

"I'm really scared" by the cyberschool proposal, said Kevin Hollenbeck, a former [Portage Public Schools](#) Board of Education member and a senior economist who studies education issues at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. "There's been some real scandals where cyberschools get tons of money and provide almost no services.

"Cyberschooling is definitely an idea that needs to be thought through," he said.

Question of effectiveness

Last year, Pennsylvania's auditor general called for a moratorium on the creation of new cyberschools. Among the reasons: concerns about the schools' "excess profits."

"We can't afford to be wasting precious financial resources on schools whose costs have absolutely no basis whatsoever on what is actually needed to educate our children," Pennsylvania Auditor General Jack Wagner said in an October 2010 news release.

Friday, a spokesman for Wagner's office said that issues with cyberschool funding are "still on our radar."

Meanwhile, in May, the progressive think tank Innovation Ohio issued a report highly critical of that state's 23 "E-schools," saying their academic results were dismal and their costs were twice those of traditional public schools.

"Though E-schools can, in principle, be an effective and needed alternative to traditional schools, Ohio's E-schools are nothing short of a disaster," the report said. "Instead of a 'win-win' proposition, Ohio Eschools are a 'lose-lose' for the Ohio children who attend them and the Ohio taxpayers who fund them."

Despite the Innovation Ohio report, Ohio Gov. John Kasich is looking to expand cybereducation, and similar efforts are under way in Florida, Indiana, Texas and Louisiana.

In those states, as in Michigan, lawmakers are attracted to the cyberschool model for multiple reasons: It appeals to school-choice advocates, it can be a less-expensive way of delivering education, and it can serve populations such as home-schoolers and dropouts who don't want the traditional school model.

"We need to be innovative and give people options," said state Sen. Tonya Schuitmaker, R-Lawton. "This is a different generation."

House Speaker James Bolger, R-Marshall, suggests cyberschool critics are those who resent competition in public education.

It's "a focus on turf for adults and misses the boat that it should instead be about options for students so all kids can learn," Bolger said.

"Cyberschools are not for all kids," he said. "I don't think they would have worked for me. But I think a variety of options is good, and a combination of options may be best."

A host of problems

While policymakers focus on the twin lures of school choice and possible cost savings, others say red flags abound.

Gary Miron, a Western Michigan University education researcher and one of the nation's foremost experts on charter schools, said he's a strong supporter of online learning but draws a distinction between a program that blends online learning with traditional education and a K-12 program that is entirely online.

"Virtual programs can be wonderful," Miron said. "But I don't think a whole virtual school is a wise thing."

He said he and other researchers "are very excited about online learning but very skeptical about cyberschools." Miron said cyberschools have "terrible records" in terms of academic achievement and fiscal accountability. He pointed to K-12 Inc., a for-profit company that is a leader in the K-12 online market: Its stock price is soaring, he said, yet only 25 percent of its schools make Adequate Yearly Progress under federal No Child Left Behind standards.

“It’s just crazy,” Miron said about the ability of distance education companies to rake in profits despite anemic academic results. “I heard about a company that claims it can service special-ed students over the phone. Really? Come on.”

Danger of fraud

There’s also greater potential for outright fraud, both academic and financial, in cyberschools. On the academic front, there’s the issue of ensuring that cyberschool students are doing their own work, particularly if students are not required to show up in person to take proctored tests.

As for financial misconduct, states have found it challenging to verify cyberschool enrollment. “These schools can sign up 1,000, 1,500 kids in no time, but then there’s no way to track it if they leave,” Miron said.

That’s already become a big problem in higher education, where online learning is much more widespread. A report released last week by the U.S. Department of Education’s Inspector General said 17 percent of the department’s open cases now involve distance learning fraud and that since Aug. 1 it has opened 100 new cases involving thousands of suspects.

The fraud cases typically involve people who enroll in distance-learning programs and apply for federal financial aid without intending to take classes. Their goal is to collect the share of financial aid given to college students for living expenses; the schools also benefit from collecting tuition for nonparticipating students.

Does it work?

Beyond the fraud issues, the U.S. Department of Education has expressed reservations about the rapid expansion of online learning programs. In a report issued last year, federal education officials noted the dearth of high-quality research on the effectiveness of online K-12 programs and said it’s still very unclear how online learning compares to traditional schooling in terms of academic achievement and under what circumstances it works and what circumstances it doesn’t.

Considering the lack of research and the problems experienced in other states, Miron said he’s surprised Michigan lawmakers seem willing to open the door to cyberschools without reservation— and that they’re willing to fund cyberschools at the same level as traditional schools, when online programs are considerably less expensive because there are minimal facility costs and less restriction on class size.

“The funding piece isn’t right, and neither is the accountability piece,” Miron said about SB 619.

“This rapid implementation of new models without research — it’s not a good idea,” he said. “They should try a few schools and test it out. Get it right and then expand it.”

Original Article:

http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2011/10/cyberschools_would_receive_fun.html