

# Cyber Charter Schools

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## INTRODUCTION

Cyber charter schools often have as their motto a version of the slogan “any pace, any place, any time.” This is because cyber charter schools offer flexibility to the families who enroll in this publicly-funded form of instruction. Students can learn from their homes at a time that meets their needs and choose from a large variety of courses. The classes are delivered via a computer and the Internet, and the students’ work and assessments are guided by a teacher.

## BACKGROUND

### Charter Schools in General

The cyber charter school movement is an arm of the overarching charter school movement. In fact, virtual schools comprise only 4% of the entire public charter school sector (Rotherham, 2006). All charter schools and cyber charter schools are considered to be public schools that are governed by independent boards of directors. Charter schools have had a great deal of growth; from 1999-2003 they yielded a 40% increase in enrollment. The Center for Education Reform (2004) reported 200 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia that serve over 684,000 students. Charter schools are accountable for student performance and program quality (Bogden, 2003).

### Cyber Charter Schools

According to Borja (2005), 22 states have established cyber schools to administer curricula for students who range from kindergarten to 12th grade. “These alternative school models differ from conventional schools by relying on parents and the Internet to deliver much of their curriculum and instruction while minimizing the use of personnel and physical facilities” (Huerta & Gonzalez, 2006, p. 103). Ultimately, cyber charter schools are responsible for demonstrating that the goals

for the school, and therefore the students, are met or the school will “cease to exist” (Center for Charter Reform, 2002; Hipsky & Adams, 2006). The school’s charter will be revoked if it does not perform.

Miron, Nelson, and Risley (2002) explained areas of cyber charter school innovation:

- Providing an innovative way to reach at-risk students who have dropped out of traditional schools.
- Offering a wider range of classes to their students. Students can be offered different (often advanced) instruction compared with courses that may be available in their local district’s schools.
- Providing structure and assistance to parents who were previously home-schooling their children. Enrolling formerly home-schooled students in cyber schools increases the amount of public oversight and guidance.
- Enabling students with health/medical/social problems that preclude attendance at a traditional school to continue their education from home or from a hospital or rehabilitation center (p. 116).

## CYBER CHARTER SCHOOLS BENEFITS AND CONTROVERSY

### Benefits of Cyber Charter Schools

The Education Commission of the States (2003) explained the draw of cyber charter schools for students and parents:

*Typically, cyber charter schools attract students who want an independent, self-directed education. Often, a cyber charter school offers multiple curricula to engage students with different interests, learning styles or needs. Many students attending cyber charter schools were previously home-schooled, live in remote areas or have health problems, which make it difficult to make the trek into a school building for classes each day (p.1).*

Many students who have disabilities find comfort in the anonymity of the cyber charter school environment. It also tends to help some students focus when the social distractions are taken away.

The cyber charter schools provide a variety of technological tools to the homes of their students. The equipment can include a computer, Webcam, printer, headsets, and traditional books at no extra charge to the families (Cook, 2002; Huerta & Gonzalez, 2004; Rapp, Eckes, & Plucker, 2006). This can be a huge service to students who otherwise would not be able to afford technology in the home, and it could potentially begin to fill in the “digital divide” for some students who have fewer financial resources.

There is a great deal of flexibility and choice for the student at a cyber charter school. For instance, students can choose from a multitude of courses based on their own interests, talents, and ability levels because the course catalogs are not limited by the constraints of a brick and mortar school. With the asynchronous method, students can participate at their own pace and at a time that best suits their learning needs and schedule regardless if it is day or night. Because most schools provide the ability to choose a combination of virtual classes and self-paced classes, they are able to receive more support in areas of need and move ahead in their own strengths.

### Societal Controversy Regarding Cyber Charter Schools

Because costs range from \$5,000 to \$7,000 per student to attend a cyber charter school (KPMG Consulting, 2001), there is controversy regarding funding. The cyber schools bill the public school districts per student enrolled in their classrooms. Although many of the charter schools deliver comparable instruction if not a higher quality, some public school advocates believe that if the school is not a traditional “brick and mortar” school it should not be funded by the charter school laws. Some states are beginning to move in this direction. California created a law in 2001 to curb funding for “nonclassroom-based *charters*”. Pennsylvania lawmakers enacted new rules that focused on bringing more scrutiny to both the financial and curricular details of online *charter schools*. The governor of Ohio signed a bill in 2003 that initiated a year-long study on how to finance these schools and imposed new funding restrictions on *cyber charters* (Hendrie, 2003).

## INSTRUCTION, ASSESSMENT AND BEYOND

### Instruction

Cyber charter schools utilize packages such as ClassServer (Bilyk, 2003) and Blackboard in order to have a common password protected place on which to log into the school. Once there, the students can go to their classes; they can find and submit their assignments and assessments. The students can engage in games, timelines, WebQuests, flash cards, slide shows, presentations, and quizzes.

Classes can be participated in through asynchronous and synchronous platforms. Asynchronous classes are conducted through two-way communication that occurs with a time delay (i.e., a classroom discussion board) that allows the participants to respond at their own convenience. The word “asynchronous” literally means not synchronous, in other words, not at the same time. For synchronous classes, all students meet in the online class at the same time and participate through chat types of discussions that are guided by the course instructor. During these lessons, the teachers can use online chalkboards to demonstrate concepts, students can break into small groups, and emoticons at the bottom of the screen demonstrate understanding. The emoticons (icons that represent various emotions in the students) can show a variety of scenarios including clapping if the student understands the concept or frowning if the student needs to have something re-taught. Figure 1 demonstrates a small group discussion that utilizes emoticons to represent the students.

Parents often play a large role in the instruction of the students, particularly in the younger years. Many families are required to communicate via phone, e-mail, or in-person with the school. Prior to beginning the process, most schools require that the parents attend an orientation and train alongside the student on the basics of technology. Often they are asked to sign a contract regarding their own responsibilities since the classroom is in their home.

Some cyber charter schools are beginning to include simulation games to teach important concepts through virtual science labs that allow students to explore volcanoes, rain forests, and other environments that were not previously available to online learners. This can be particularly helpful to the physically disabled student

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