Chapter 17
The Holistic Model for Blended Learning:
A New Model for K–12 District–Level Cyber Schools

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ABSTRACT

Pennsylvania is at the forefront of the public cyber charter schooling movement in America. As more and more students elect to transfer from traditional public schools into cyber charter schools–and their districts of origin are forced to forfeit their tuition allocations–a need for a public school alternative to cyber charter schools has emerged. Using current practices in Pennsylvania's public schools as a backdrop, this article presents a new model for district-level cyber schooling, called the holistic model for blended learning, that public schools in Pennsylvania (and elsewhere) can use to compete with cyber charter schools and meet the growing demand for K-12 online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Pennsylvania is at the leading edge of a national movement toward K-12 distance education and this phenomenon is perhaps most apparent in the growing popularity of cyber charter schools across the state. In the 2006-2007 school year, an estimated 15,000 students were enrolled in Pennsylvanis's cyber charter schools. This number represents an increase from approximately 10,000 students in the 2005-2006 school year and 5,000 students in the 2004-2005 school year (Smith, 2005; Chute, 2005; Silver, 2007). This enrollment trend, coupled with the fiscal policies that govern financing cyber charter schools, poses significant threats and challenges to Pennsylvania's public school system. Public school districts need to adopt a model for cyber schooling that they can

use to effectively meet their students' demand for distance education so they can retain the tuition allocations that they are *obligated* to forfeit to cyber charter schools (Raffaele, 2004). Put very simply, public school districts need a way to compete with cyber charter schools.

For instructional technology innovators who are devoted to supporting and improving public schools in America, the freedom granted to Pennsylvania's cyber charter schools to meet the demand for K-12 distance education, coupled with the financial burden that has been placed upon school districts to finance their endeavors, introduce enormous challenges and opportunities. There is a real and pressing need to craft a district-level response to cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania and the solution that emerges will undoubtedly have implications on a national scale (NCES, 2003).

While few would argue with the commonly voiced claim that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative of 2000 offers *choice,* another extremely valuable by-product of this piece of legislation is that it inspires a type of healthy *competition* between public schools and external education providers that will ultimately benefit American students. Currently, public school districts are losing this competition when it comes to distance education–and this stark reality becomes apparent if we examine their response to the cyber charter school movement in Pennsylvania (Knade, 2001). Unlike a regular brick-and-mortar charter school where districts at least have the opportunity to offer a viable classroom-based alternative to the curricular options presented, in Pennsylvania's *cyber* charter schools, districts don't even "field a team." In the vast majority of cases, they are unable to meet their students' demand for distance education because they are not aware that a viable model for K-12 district-level cyber schooling exists. While this is a significant problem now, as enrollment in cyber charter schools continues to increase and the schools begin to present larger

and larger bills to public school districts, the situation will become critical for public schools in Pennsylvania in the near future.

Several ill-conceived attempts to craft a public school response to the cyber charter school movement in Pennsylvania have already been attempted in the past few years and each has met with limited success. This article examines one particular attempt in the section that explains deficient models. This attempt is well worth investigating for two main reasons:

- It provides an excellent example that can be scrutinized to identify strengths and weaknesses of different models for developing a district-level alternative to cyber charter schools in a real world setting.
- Its lack of success underscores the need for a categorical shift in thinking that must occur within the field of instructional technology if we are to have any practical and positive effect upon the learning and teaching that takes place in the online environment and in the classrooms of the future.

WHAT MAKES CYBER CHARTER SCHOOLS WORK?

The term *cyber charter school* is used throughout this article to represent the publicly funded, state approved educational institutions in Pennsylvania that provide home-schooled students with a viable full-time curriculum, support services, and means of access—along with a legitimate diploma upon completion of coursework. While there are other full-time private cyber schools operating in Pennsylvania that offer similar services for a fee, this study focuses upon *public* cyber charter schools for two reasons:

- They each use models for K-12 online learning that have enjoyed at least some degree

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