Chapter 13
The Next Frontier in Public Education:
Cyber Charter Schools

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ABSTRACT

Publicly funded alternatives to traditional public schools have taken place in the form of charter schools and, most recently, cyber charter schools. Cyber charter schools are fully online K-12 public schools and they "look" like traditional schools since students learn traditional subjects and are still subject to the same public accountability measures as their traditional brick and mortar counterparts. This chapter examines cyber charter schools in practice and summarizes the most controversial issues surrounding this form of school choice. Issues such as the legality of cyber charters under state charter laws; the allocation of per pupil funding; the use of for-profit companies in school management; ensuring access to cyber charters; and fulfilling state mandates top the list of salient issues with respect to cyber charter schools.

INTRODUCTION

As we move into the digital age, it follows that technology will be a vital component of the K-12 educational landscape. Technology has expanded to improve educational opportunities for students, and schools and districts have used technology to improve quality and access to the nation's schools. Parental choice in public education has also increased this past decade in light of requirements of, among others, the *No Child Left Behind* (2001) legislation. The rapid expanse of charter schools, designed to encourage innovation and competition with public schools, was thought to revitalize traditional public education. Under state charter legislation, an additional advance in school

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reform has emerged. Combining the convenience of online learning and the innovation of school choice options, cyber charter schools seemingly provide the best of both worlds. Cyber charter schools are publicly funded K-12 schools which operate under a state's charter school law. The primary differences between this type of learning and learning in a traditional classroom are location and accessibility (Hassel & Terell, 2004). Students are no longer confined to attend a geographically-assigned, brick and mortar school to account for their attendance. Cyber charter schools create "borderless" schools allowing students from various school districts and states to attend.

Today's brick and mortar schools are faced with a number of problems. Many are overcrowded or in deteriorating condition. School districts sometimes struggle to secure funds to repair existing facilities (Odden & Picus, 2004) or build new ones to accommodate a growing student population. In the current age of accountability, schools and school districts are facing tremendous pressure from lawmakers, education officials, and parents to produce students who are competent and able to fully participate and function in an ever-changing society. As a response to these challenges, cyber charter schools have emerged as a workable alternative to traditional forms of public education (Huerta, Gonzalez & d'Entremont, 2006).

The purpose of this chapter is to define and detail the growing interest in cyber charters as a viable option for school choice. This chapter provides a brief introduction to cyber charter schools, describing the history of school reform in the K-12 educational arena and detailing the legal and financial issues that have arisen with the advent of this type of innovative school. The second part of the chapter portrays cyber charters in practice by combining profiles of several currently operating cyber charter schools. The chapter then describes several of the issues and controversies that surround such an atypical form of public education and concludes with suggestions for future research. For purposes of this chapter, the terms cyber charter schools and cyber schools are used interchangeably and refer to an independently operated, public K-12 school that uses technology to deliver a significant portion of its instruction to students.

BACKGROUND

Use of Computers and Technology in Schools

Computers have been a staple in the nation's classrooms for decades as an assist to traditional instruction and to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). As internet access has increased, school districts and states created online opportunities for students to take additional courses and supplement their instruction. To date, nearly 100% of public schools have internet access with nearly 94% of instructional rooms currently outfitted with computers (Snyder & Dillow, 2010).

Distance education is nothing new to schooling, nor is distance education utilized solely by a particular age group. Correspondence courses have allowed those unable to attend traditional school to gain skills or take classes. During the past decade, the number of students taking online courses has increased. Marsh, Carr-Chellman and Sockman (2009) report enrollment in distance education programs will rise annually by 20%, and is currently nearing one million participants. By fall 2005, Rovai, Ponton, and Baker (2008) report an estimated 3.2 million college students took at least one online course, representing an increase of nearly one million students from the previous year.

The benefits of online learning are great. Communication is enhanced between students and teachers; different learning styles are more easily accommodated; assessment is frequent; and, access to curriculum and instruction is unlimited and flexible (Hassel & Terrell, 2004).