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Cyber Schools in Michigan: Stretching The Dollar Too Far For Distance Education

**Introduction:**

Finding the most cost effective and academically effective way to educate students in Michigan is of utmost importance, which may be why education policy is often up for debate. The dollar is already being stretched to provide Michigan students with an enriching public education. However, cyber schools could make this even harder as taxpayer dollars allotted for public schools are taken from them and given to cyber schools. To make this problem worse, evidence has not shown that cyber school is an academically effective method of education at the K-12 level. The government is supporting these cyber schools when they may be providing a subpar education to their students.

Senate Bill 0619 was passed into law in Michigan recently, The act amended the Revised School Code by repealing the previous limit of only two cyber charter schools and only 1,000 cyber school students in Michigan. The number of cyber charter schools will now expand from two to five until December 2013, and to 10 until December 31, 2014. After this date, the number of cyber charter schools may not exceed 15. The governor should consider that budgets are already tight for Michigan public schools, and the fiscal impact that the expanding number of cyber charter schools will have on the public school system is difficult to predict. The effectiveness of these cyber schools compared to traditional public schools is up for debate as well. While cyber school may provide another option for students and their parents, the state should repeal the law. Education policy is reserved to the states by the tenth amendment, which gives Michigan the ability to solve this problem. The state government is also responsible for financing the majority of public education. Other analytical tools that I will use will be state fiscal constraints and the negative externalities such as the decreased quality of public schools with more cyber schools.

**Research Design:**

Relevant components of the policy problem to be considered are the fiscal impact and how a cyber education compares to a traditional education. To make a recommendation about how Michigan should deal with cyber schools, we need to consider the benefits and challenges of cyber schools. I plan to do my research by investigating the fiscal impact of cyber schools, the educational quality of cyber schools, and the other effects that cyber schools can have on public schools. While research on cyber schools in comparison to traditional schools provides limited findings since most studies are based only on the study of adults, by looking at other states like Pennsylvania, Michigan might be able to better assess the effectiveness of cyber schools. The evidence that I intend to use will support my argument, but also show the merits of cyber school, which I will use to make counterarguments. I plan to acknowledge the benefits of cyber school, but I want to investigate how integrating technology into the classroom can be more beneficial than completely cutting out seat-time in a classroom.

Senate Bill 0619 expands the number of cyber schools in Michigan, which gives students options but it could be a subpar option with a negative fiscal impact. The number expands until it is capped at 2% of enrollment. This may seem like a small number, but when you put it into perspective by using statistics from the CCD and consider that there are about 1,587,067 public school students and public schools receive near $7,000 for each student, the governor could see how this would result in a loss of over 200 million dollars for the public school system as these dollars are given to cyber schools. The governor needs to support policy that puts taxpayers dollars in the hands of those who can provide the best education to Michigan students. There are tight state fiscal constraints on public schools, and cyber schools could make providing a good education even harder. By recognizing the benefits but realizing that those benefits are not guaranteed and are costly to public schools, a negative externality of taking away their funding, the governor should see that the bill should be repealed or amended. If it were to be amended I would recommend passing policy to allow for some course to be taken online but not all of them.

My research strategy for building a case to support my recommendation is to present data from other states that have had virtual school systems for a longer period of time. Pennsylvania provides an excellent case study to show how the challenges of cyber school can sometimes outweigh the benefits. I will also show how cyber schools are doing in other states across the country and make attempts to compare policies. The *New York Times* and the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes both showed how the Pennsylvania online students were falling behind the traditional students

While acknowledging that data shows that online schooling can have benefits at the adult level, I will explain how policy on K-12 education should not be based on this research. Students at this level are in a developmental stage, and I think data will show that they need some form of in person, classroom education. I want to investigate how important in person contact with a teacher is to a student’s academic achievement. I will also present data of student performance in cyber schools versus traditional schools at the K-12 level. Many of the articles, such as the one by Barbour and Ellis, that I have cited and annotated below show that the realities of virtual schools are not as great as they seem to be.

**Resources:**

Barbour, Michael K., and Thomas C. Reeves. "The Reality of Virtual Schools: A Review of the Literature." *Elsevier* (2008): Web. 04 Nov. 2012.

* Shows how virtual schools have developed and grown, and shows the benefits and challenges of virtual schooling
* Suggestions are made for how to extend the benefits and eliminate the challenges as well, and could become useful in making a policy recommendation

CCD. The Common Core of Data. "State Profiles Home Page." *State Profiles Home Page*. National Center for Education Statistics, 2010-11. Web. 24 Sept. 2012.

* Helps to put the fiscal impact into perspective by providing enrollment statistics

CREDO. "Charter School Performance in Pennsylvania." *CREDO*. Stanford University, Apr. 2011. Web. 24 Sept. 2012.

* Study on online schooling in Pennsylvania that shows subpar test scores in math and reading

Duncan, Arne. *U.S. Department of Education Strategic Plan for Fiscal years 2011-2014.* U.S. Department of Education. 2011. Web. 17 Oct. 2012.

* Presents the federal governments support of innovative technologies. It will acknowledge how technology is important in the classroom, but I will explain how it shouldn’t be the classroom.

Ellis, Kathleen. "The Realities of Virtual Schools: Cyber Charter Schools: Evolution, Issues, and Opportunities in Funding and Localized Oversight." *ERIC World's Largest Digital Library of Education Literature*. Educational Horizons, 2008.

* Will use to introduce Pennsylvania example, a state with a history of cyber charters.

McHugh, Jack. "2011 Senate Bill 619: Repeal Restrictions on Public "cyber Schools" - Michigan Votes.” Mackinac Center for Public Policy, n.d. Web. 24 Sept. 2012.

* This article gives an inside look on the development of the act, and shows how the bill was changed and reworded up until it was passed and signed into law.

National Education Technology Plan Technical Working Group. *U.S. Department of Education*. N.p., Nov. 2010. Web. 17 Oct. 2012. <http://www.ed.gov/technology/netp-2010 >.

* Look at three areas that show the benefits of online education: Assessment: Measure What Matters, Executive Summary*,* Productivity: Redesign and Transform.
* Use them as counterarguments or use to consider ways to incorporate online education but not as a complete cyber school

Saul, Stephanie. "Lagging in Performance: Pennsylvania Online Schools." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 12 Dec. 2011. Web. 24 Sept. 2012.

* This NY Times article shows the subpar performance of students in Pennsylvania online schools

Senate Fiscal Agency. Michigan. State Senate. "0619: Summary As Enacted - Cyber School Revisions." Senator Patrick J. Colbeck, 25 June 2012. Web. 24 Sept. 2012.

* Presents a summary of the bill, and addresses the uncertainty regarding the fiscal impact

Thomas, David. *Archived: Bush Administration Celebrates Charter Schools Week*.

U.S. Department of Education, 5 May 2004. Web. 17 Oct. 2012.

<http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2004/05/05032004.html

* Charter schools are praised by the federal government, because they provide options to students, but should the government provide subpar options?

Watson, John, Butch Gemin, and Maryland State Department of Education. "The State of Online Learning in Maryland 2010-11." *Maryland Public Schools*. Maryland Public Schools, Dec. 2010. Web. 24 Sept. 2012.

* Online learning is prominent in many other states as well, and this article provides a list of states to research to see how virtual schools failed or succeeded in other places