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Political Science 326

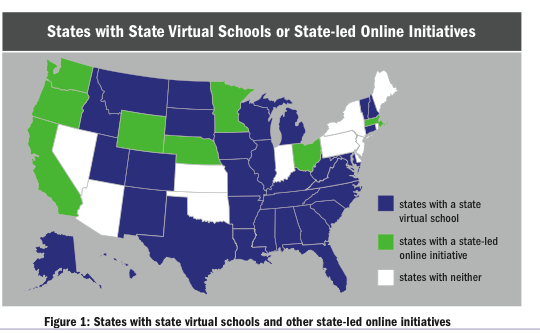
Professor Bednar

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Data Report: Cyber Schools in Michigan

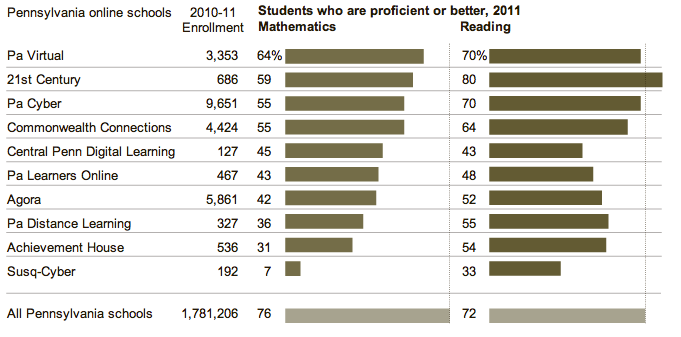
Public Act 129 of 2012, also referred to as Senate Bill 619, is one of many pieces of legislation regarding education policies in Michigan. This specific bill, which pushed to eliminate the cap on the number of online public “cyber schools” was introduced by Senator Patrick Colbeck (R) and referred to the Senate Education Committee on September 7, 2011 (McHugh 1). After almost eight months of debate in the house and senate, the bill was enrolled on May 15, 2012 with the signature of Governor Snyder, and it allows for a phased in expansion of the number of cyber charter schools in Michigan. The bill amends 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. Each cyber school is limited to 2,500 pupils for the first school year, 5,000 pupils for the second, and no more than 10,000 for the third and subsequent years (Michigan 1). The state of Michigan plans to cap enrollment in cyber charter schools at 2 percent. The issue with this policy is 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.

Cyber schools are not unique to Michigan. Many other states have state virtual schools as well as many other private cyber charter schools. As shown in the map below, one can see how many of these cyber schools throughout the U.S. are supported by the states (Watson 11).

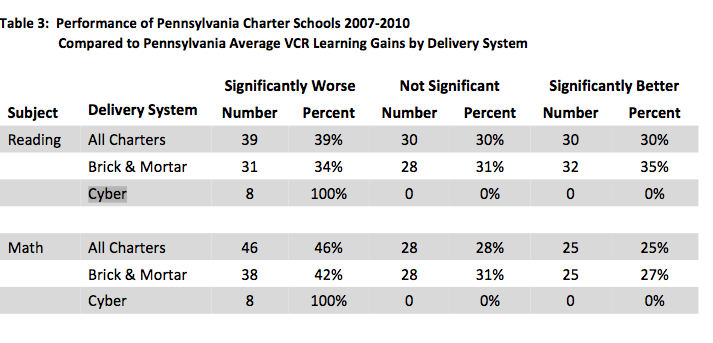


State endorsed private schools provide alternative education options for students and their parents, so many states could see the expansion of cyber charter schools as a response to the demand by the people for an online option.

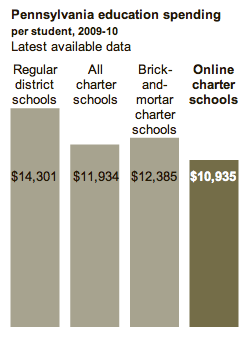
Michigan could look to other states like the ones highlighted on the map above to see the possible impacts of virtual schools on the education of students. One of the most important questions for a state to consider when extending the option of online schooling to more students is how this alternative form of class will affect their learning. Looking to Pennsylvania, a state that is not highlighted on the map but has plenty of experience with cyber charter schools, one can gather a lot of data on the performance of students in online charter schools. While Pennsylvania is indicated as not having a state virtual school or other state-led initiative on the map, there are numerous cyber charter schools in this state. The reason for their absence on the map is due to the states lack of policy on cyber charter schools specifically (Ellis 143-144). The New York Times published an article on the performance of students in Pennsylvania online schools versus the performance of students in Pennsylvania traditional schools that showed how the Pennsylvania online students were falling behind the traditional students (Saul 1).



The above graphic, supported by data gathered from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Commonwealth Foundation, accompanied the article in the New York Times, and it was used to show how the percentage of students who were proficient or better in reading and mathematics in 2011 was lower in Pennsylvania online schools than in all Pennsylvania schools (Saul 1). This data causes a state to question if expanding online schooling is an effective and worthwhile reform.

A study published by The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at the Stanford University on the performance of charter schools in Pennsylvania had similar results to the data provided by the New York Times article. As seen below, the data provided on online schooling in Pennsylvania does not support it as an effective alternative to traditional schooling.

“In both reading and math, all 8 cyber schools perform significantly worse than their traditional public school counterparts” (CREDO 9). There are many more than 8 cyber schools in Pennsylvania though, so there could be a possible bias in the data if this sampling was not representative of all of the cyber schools in Pennsylvania. However, since the data was published by a legitimate source, the cyber charter schools probably are ineffective alternatives to traditional schools.

While data on the effectiveness of online schools in other states is something to be considered, Michigan may also want to consider the fiscal impact of Public Act 129 of 2012. There are already 1,587,067 public school students in Michigan (CCD 1). The bill eliminates the condition that a student must have been enrolled in a public school prior to a cyber school, so the State could be responsible for funding a greater number of students’ education. “If the expansion of cyber schools leads to an increase in the enrollment of pupils not currently in the public K-12 system (dropouts, nonpublic students, or home- schooled students), then there will be an increase in State costs to pay for the additional pupils counted in membership” (Michigan 4). The cost per additional pupil would be at least $6,966. The fiscal impact may not be that significant though. By taking a look at Pennsylvania, a state which has the third highest enrollment in cyber schools, the education costs per student are less than traditional schools as displayed in the chart below (Saul 1). 

The data available on Pennsylvania was easiest to find because of the controversy surrounding their cyber schools at this time due to the poor performance of their students. One limitation on the data that was available was the inability to see how Pennsylvania online schools compare to those in other states.

Controversy seems to always surround changes in any state’s education system, especially at the K-12 level. There was much debate on Senate Bill 619 before it was passed into law, because there are many different ways to look at cyber schools. Some see online education as an option that should be given to students and parents. While others see the ineffective cyber schools in other states and fear that this option may not provide students with the best education. Since online learning is a new alternative to traditional learning, obtaining legitimate data from other states on the impact that cyber schools have socially and fiscally was difficult, and the effect that the expanding number of cyber schools will have on the education of Michigan students is difficult to interpret.

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