



BERKS COUNTY
COLA
Committee on Legislative Action

THE ISSUE:

24 P.S. §§ 17-1701-A et seq.
Cyber Charter Schools

Cyber Charter Schools are independent public schools established and operated under a charter from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. These schools utilize technology to deliver a significant portion of instruction to students virtually. The current cyber charter funding mechanism forces school districts to overpay cyber charter schools, including the costs for special education students attending these schools, by hundreds of millions of dollars each school year, according to the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA). **Overpaying cyber charter schools, in addition to rising costs, not only impacts school district costs and budgets, but also impacts taxpayer dollars.**

PRIORITY:
Provide access to a high-quality education for the 70,000+ students in Berks County

TARGETED ADVOCACY AREA: CYBER CHARTER SCHOOLS

DATA POINTS

BERKS COUNTY

\$13,117

COST PER STUDENT

\$30,250

COST PER SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT

46%

increase in Berks County students enrolled in cyber charter schools between May 2020 and December 2020

\$11.7 million

the expected increase in cyber charter school expenses for Berks County school districts for 2020-2021

\$350 million

the expected increase in cyber charter school expenses for all Pennsylvania school districts for 2020-2021

Data points provided are from the 2020-2021 school year to date.

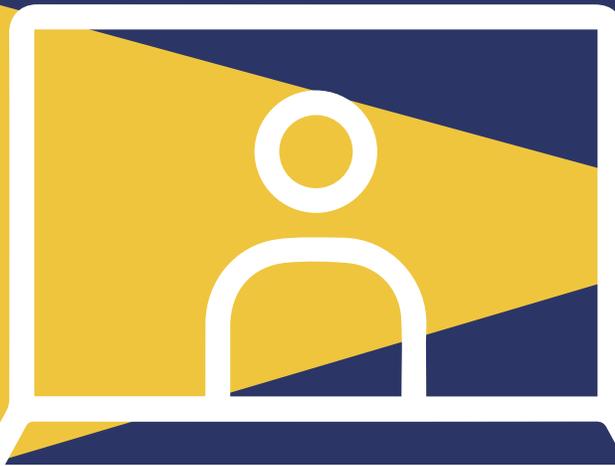
KEY TALKING POINTS POLICY PRIORITIES

- Under current charter school law, tuition payments are calculated based on the budgeted expenditures of the student's school district of residence, rather than the charter school's cost to educate a student. This calculation includes services that may or may not be covered by cyber charter schools, including food services, library services, and athletic and extracurricular activities.
- School districts are required to provide individualized supports to special education students, with costs ranging greatly from child-to-child based on needs. However, cyber charter schools receive the same rate per each child with special needs, regardless of the differences in needs, costs, and services provided.
- A 2016 PSBA study of charter / cyber charter school enrollment data found that school districts paid charter schools in excess of \$100 million more for special education than charter schools spent on special education services.
- In almost all cases, school district costs are not reduced when students attend cyber charter schools, as school districts must incur the fixed costs of building space, maintenance, utility bills, and transportation.

Berks County school districts offer in-house alternative cyber education at a cost that is, on average, between 20-30% less than what districts pay in cyber charter school tuition.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- Change in Funding Formula
- Reduction in Tuition Fees
- Accountability for Funds
- Transparency of Funds
- Support of District Options



IDEAS FOR MOVING FORWARD / ACTION NEEDED

- **Develop a more equitable funding formula which is critical for both school districts and the taxpayers they serve.** By bringing funding of cyber charter schools in line with the actual cost of educating a child in a virtual environment, school districts will not have to pass the unnecessary charges to their constituents in the form of property tax increases.
- **Ensure that any change in the funding formula results in a reduction of the tuition fee charged to local school districts.**
- **Focus on the funding structure without limiting choice.** Legislative changes with the funding formula would remove tension between school districts and cyber charter schools.
- **Increase the oversight of cyber charter school budgets.** This is necessary in order to create a level playing field among school districts and their cyber charter school counterparts. Because cyber charter schools are funded by the same taxpayer dollars as local school districts, the accountability for funds should be the same across the board.
- **Ensure cyber charter school expense transparency, equivalent to the requirements for school districts.** Transparency regarding how much a cyber charter school is spending on educational needs, compared to administration and other costs, will help parents and caregivers make more informed decisions, and will help school districts educate taxpayers on the costs associated with tuition payments.
- **Continue to promote the availability of a high-quality alternative cyber education option offered through the student's home district.** Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many school districts offered a local option for alternative cyber education. Since the pandemic, these have become an increasingly viable option for students and families. In Berks County, enrollment in district-sponsored alternative cyber education is up more than 300% compared to the 2019-2020 school year. With increased support from the state level, school districts can continue to provide a high-quality education in an evolving environment.



NEED MORE INFORMATION:

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