Local districts would welcome cyber tuition reform

By JOELLEN WANKEL erajoellenw@gmail.com   May 10, 2019

Budgets, funding and related fiscal changes are typically a hot topic when it comes to education. A recent report from Education Voters of Pennsylvania suggested a reform to current formulas for cyber school tuition, noting a flat formula of $5,000 for regular education and $8,865 for special education would go a long way toward helping school districts while cutting down on the misuse of taxpayer funds.

Bradford is one of the districts that feels the sting of reduced funding due to tuition costs for students who attend cyber charter schools.

"School districts must pay the average budgeted amount per pupil (versus our actual costs) to cyber charter schools," said Katherine Pude, superintendent of Bradford Area School District. "We estimate our costs to be roughly $700,000 next school year, which takes from the pupils who physically attend our schools."

The district offers cyber school options at a fraction of the cost, is able to monitor progress and is able to provide tutoring for students who need additional support, Pude said.

"Yet, we are required to pay the higher rates to for-profit cyber charters who have little overhead costs and different rules for accountability to our taxpayers," she said. "The system is harmful to public education and needs reformed."

Another local school district is already dealing with an almost $1 million deficit — Otto-Eldred School District. The matter was discussed at the April school board meeting, with various options considered, including cuts to different programs and staff in various areas.

Matthew Splain, O-E's superintendent, noted that the amount each district is required to pay in cyber charter school tuition varies drastically from the amount the district allocates to provide for each student's academic needs within the physical school setting. In fact, even the cyber school alternative provided by the district is significantly less expensive than the amount the state stipulates the districts must pay.

"The cost that districts are obligated to pay are not in line with what we can provide the same education for," Splain noted.

He went on to give some general examples of the potential impact on local districts.

"If we are charged $10,000 or $12,000 (per student), we can provide a full-time cyber school to kids for $3,000 or $4,000. This leads to the question of why their costs are so much more," he said. "Even for special education, their cost can be $30,000. Our costs do not come near that.'

Splain said, from an economic standpoint, that is not a good use of public dollars.

"There is no accountability for it," he said, "and none of these schools have a passing score of 70 on the SPP."

The SPP, or School Performance Profile, was a five-year process that was designed to show how Pennsylvania schools performed academically. With the advent of the Future Ready PA Index in 2018, the process was halted since comparisons could no longer be made.

However, during the five-year interval of the SPP, charter schools in Pennsylvania failed notably. Of the 13 cyber charter schools operating in Pennsylvania, only one consistently came within a few points of the 70 score considered passing. Three others came close to the passing score at one point without succeeding, while the rest of the Pennsylvania cyber charter schools received scores that were toward the bottom of the grading.

While supportive of options for students' educational pursuits, Splain went on to note concerns related to the quality of education cyber school students receive.

"We are very open and understanding to the idea of choice. It is very good circumstances for kids that would benefit from a cyber program," he said. "There are kids that would benefit or do benefit. Unfortunately, those are the minority of the kids involved.

"In most cases, it is not in the students' best interests to not be involved in public schools," he said. "In terms of immediate resources and immediate support, we can do a better job, top to bottom. I can look through the numbers of kids — dozens of kids enrolled in our program in the last few years — very few completed the coursework and graduated. If they come back, they are behind. If they leave as an eighth-grader, five years later we are still paying the bill. Those kids are not graduating, but if they stayed in the district I guarantee they would be graduating."

Ultimately, the deficit Otto-Eldred currently faces may not be the last of their financial struggle.

"If nothing changes, we will continue to have to make more and more difficult decisions in our budget," Splain said. "I understand there is a large lobbying, pro-cyber group that wants to see cyber as an option. Cyber schools aren't going to go away. We just want an even playing field."

During an April 2019 meeting of the Smethport Area School Board, similar concerns were raised when board members discussed a $50,000 tuition increase for cyber schools — for the current school year.

Smethport Superintendent David London expressed concern about the discrepancy between the amount required for Smethport students in cyber charter versus the cost in neighboring districts.

Meanwhile, Business Manager Sue Jordan noted she was attempting to find a reason for the cyber school tuition increases, and School Director Dan Wertz noted the district paid more than $364,000 for cyber school tuition in a previous school year.

Wertz also expressed his view that reform was needed at the state level.

reporter01