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School funding fights developing at Capitol

By John Finnerty CNHI News Service May 5, 2019



HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania's cyber schools overbill public school districts \$200 million a year, the head of the Pennsylvania School Board Association said last week.

Cyber school supporters strongly disagree, citing the enhanced opportunities those schools provide.

The school board group is calling on the state Legislature to act on legislation that would discourage families from using cyber schools if the traditional public schools offer similar online programs, said Nathan Mains, chief executive officer of the Pennsylvania School Board Association.

Mains said school board members are also encouraged that Sen. Patrick Browne, R-Lehigh County, recently introduced legislation that would create a commission to examine the way charter schools are funded in Pennsylvania.

Measures to force parents to pay if they choose to enroll their students in outside cyber schools if their local district offers online classes have been introduced in both the state House and Senate. The author of the House legislation, state Rep. Curt Sonney, R-Erie County, is chairman of the Education Committee. But in a recent interview, Sonney said other charter school reforms might be on the front-burner before lawmakers try to tackle the funding controversy.

That suggestion doesn't satisfy members of the state's local school boards, Mains said.

Any reform effort that doesn't tackle the funding concerns "misses the mark," he said in a rally in the Capitol rotunda.

School leaders say that when traditional public schools offer online classes, the cost is about one-third of what they're often billed in tuition costs by the state's cyber schools.

"Consider that in 2016-17, school districts paid cyber charter schools more than \$463 million," said Annette Stevenson, a PSBA spokeswoman. "The average total cyber charter school tuition payment made by a district was \$926,000. We're talking about large amounts of dollars (overpayments) coming out of already constrained budgets."

Ana Meyers, executive director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, recently said the school board group is making an "apples-to-oranges" comparison because cyber schools offer "significantly more opportunities" for students enrolled online.

"If traditional public schools want to have a fact-based discussion about cyber education in the Commonwealth, school district must be required to track and report their cyber program's academic rigor, attendance, special education services and growth rate," Meyers said.

When traditional public schools report data on their online programs, separate from their brick-and-mortar program, the performance results are "for the most part, worse than cyber charter schools," Meyers said this week.

The cyber schools are only part of the school funding fight being waged at the Capitol. House Republicans began moving legislation this week to a \$100 million expansion of a program that provides tax credits to those who donate to scholarships that can be used for families to pay for private school tuition.

House Bill 800, authored by House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Allegheny County, was approved by the Education Committee by 14-9 a straight party line vote, with all the Democrats on the committee voting against it.

The legislation would almost double the amount available in tax credits, to \$210 million, for the Education Improvement Tax Credit program. The legislation would also bump the income eligibility threshold up from \$85,000 a year to \$95,000 a year for families to benefit. The income threshold goes up \$15,608 per child, meaning that a family with two children can qualify for the scholarship with a household income of \$125,216, said Susan Spicka, executive director of Education Voters of Pennsylvania, a project of the Harrisburg-based Keystone Research Center, a think tank with ties to labor groups.

"It is deeply disappointing that the House Education Committee passed HB 800, legislation that provides an additional \$100 million to subsidize the private/religious education of wealthy families through the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) private/religious school voucher program," Spicka said this week.

In a memo to other lawmakers about the bill, Turzai said the increase in the income eligibility limit is necessary "to allow more middle class families access to this program."

The legislation would also stipulate that once a student is awarded a scholarship under the program, he or she is entitled to receive it every year until high school graduation, regardless of whether the family's income changes, Turzai said.

The state also offers \$50 million in tax credits for the Opportunity Scholarship, which helps families afford private school if they live in an area served by a poorly-performing public school.

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Ⅲ Poll

Cyber school funding

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