

# Altoona Mirror

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## Schools strained by cyber options

### Proposed bills would exempt districts from paying tuition

Facing deep budget deficits owed in large part to state mandates including cyber charter school tuition, the Altoona Area and Hollidaysburg Area school boards last week both dreamt about the potential impact of legislation that would drastically reduce their costs of cyber charter school tuition.

House Bill 526, introduced by Rep. Curtis Sonney, R-Erie, was referred to the House Education Committee, Feb. 19. It would exempt school districts from paying cyber charter school tuition if they offer students a full-time cyber education within the district.

A companion to that legislation is in the Senate. Senate Bill 34 was introduced to the Senate Education Committee by Sen. Judy Schwank, D-Berks, in January. Neither bill has advanced.

Cyber charters advertise free tuition for families. But school district budgets, by state law, pay the cost of tuition.

The Altoona Area School District is paying more than \$1 million in cyber charter costs for students.

*“If legislation changes cyber laws, it could result in more than \$1 million in savings per year for us,”* Superintendent Charles Prijatelj said.

Rep. Lou Schmitt, R-Altoona, is a cosponsor listed on the HB 526 with 59 others both Republican and Democrat.

*“We need to call our senators, legislators to make them aware that this is a necessity for our district,”* Prijatelj said.

Current state law requires school districts to pay student tuition to cyber charter schools when students choose them over their brick-and-mortar school district.

If HB 526 passes, the cost of cyber charter schools would be paid by the parents of students who attend them, and Senate Bill 34 similarly reads: *“If a public school district offers a cyber-based program equal in scope and content to an existing publicly chartered cyber charter school and a student in that district attends a cyber charter school instead of the district’s cyber-based program, the school district shall not be required to provide funding to pay for the student’s attendance at a cyber charter school.”*

Hollidaysburg Area School Board member Melissa Mitchell asked about the legislation on Wednesday, as the school board grappled with a budget deficit.

Hollidaysburg Area expects to pay more than \$700,000 to cyber charter schools next school year, Hollidaysburg Area Superintendent Bob Gildea said.

*“That would be a good amount of money we could use for other things,”* Gildea said.

Gildea said that Hollidaysburg Area has its own cyber program.

Altoona Area School District also has a cyber program for high school and junior high students and is expanding its cyber program to elementary school students next year.

The school board voted Monday to begin the elementary cyber program.

Prijatelj said school districts can purchase the same cyber curriculum that cyber charter schools use but provide the education much more efficiently.

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