

Do cyber charter schools help or hurt the educational system?

February 26 2014, by Andy Elder



Cyber charter schools can be a financial drain on their host school districts, according to Alison Carr-Chellman, Penn State professor of education, but they can also prompt public schools to be innovative and more effective. Credit: [photos.com/Jupiterimages](https://www.photos.com/Jupiterimages)

When charter schools were first created in the early 1990s, they were viewed as alternative learning environments for a small number of students. The ideal model was to unhitch these schools from many of the state laws and district regulations governing traditional public schools,

and allow them to tailor the education to families looking for an option outside the conventional system.

Typically, for each student who leaves a public school system to attend a charter school, the school district pays the charter the equivalent of what it cost to educate that learner in their home district.

"In the beginning, because there were so few students, the drain on the host school districts' coffers was hardly a drip," says Alison Carr-Chellman, Penn State professor of education and department head of learning and performance systems. "But with the proliferation of charter schools and even more notably, cyber charter schools, that drip has turned into a significant stream."

"Cyber charter schools are what I think of as the Wild West of today's educational terrain," explains Carr-Chellman, who has given a popular TEDx talk on this topic. "They are attractive to parents and students for a number of reasons. They allow students to work at their own pace, attend school from home and remove themselves from situations in which they may feel threatened or uncomfortable."

Cyber charter schools can serve a purpose, says Carr-Chellman. "There are specific populations that are not satisfied for one reason or another with traditional brick-and-mortar schools. The problem is that some of the funding dollars that follow a student from the public school system to the cyber charter school are going to national, for-profit corporations. Those corporations want to make a profit, and some of the largest cyber charter companies are bringing in multi-million dollar annual revenue streams."

Carr-Chellman adds that, in her opinion, they also want to show that the large bureaucracy of a state-run education system can be run much more efficiently.

"If they can show that it can be done much more cheaply by not having facilities, by hiring teachers who are not certified, by hiring them at low wages, and also by hiring a lot of tutors instead of teachers—if they can do all of that, they can show that education is done in a much cheaper way than the traditional state-run public schools," she says.

The appeal to parents, including increasingly those who once home-schooled their children, is the ready availability of free materials and a flexible schooling that gives parents specific directions with few restrictions, she notes. Companies can provide materials because they typically are spared the costs related to maintaining a physical building, busing students to school, and providing meals and athletics or arts programs.

"Boxes and boxes of stuff arrive for you to work with your child through the year in the cyber charter experience," Carr-Chellman says, citing parents who say that they have received a curriculum, an Internet connection, and a variety of equipment including computers, microscopes, and chemistry sets. "That's very appealing to a home-school parent who may have been functioning largely on their own, spending time creating new materials and mapping unique curricular solutions for their child."

Lost revenues and the public's public desires for tailored, individualized, home-based learning solutions are causing some school districts to start their own cyber charters. In 2009, in Pennsylvania, more than \$300 million tax dollars went to cyber charter schools for more than 10,000 students.

"That's not a bad thing," says Carr-Chellman. "I'm very much in favor of local and district-level innovations. This is really pushing them to do some innovation. That's not a bad outcome."

"The bad outcome," she says, "is that a lot of the money is leaving the public system and going into cyber charter schools that are really interested in making a profit and making the point that the state-run education system is failing."

She notes out that corporation-backed cyber charters have big lobbying, advertising and marketing budgets that local districts don't. That doesn't mean, however, that the local districts can't counteract the pull of the corporation-backed cyber charters.

"It's up to the public schools to be innovative and do some things that are so different they will be exciting to kids and to parents, as well as highly educational and effective," she says.

"I think at that point we'll have sort of a detente. There will still be those for-profit groups out there, but the local cyber charters and the local district cyber charters will be more successful because they'll be more appealing to those seeking a local solution to local problems."

Realizing that some of their tax dollars are going toward advertising and marketing, and also lobbying to get more money into the pipeline, the states are starting to push back.

"But not in a thoughtful way, in my opinion," Carr-Chellman says. "Basically, what they've been doing is conflating all charters as if they were one monolithic whole. They should look at how those funding formulas are working and distinguish between local charters and national charters, focusing on the power of local schools to be locally responsive."

The cost to educate a child has traditionally varied by geography, according to Carr-Chellman. "It costs more to educate a child in Philadelphia than it does in Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania, based on

traditional school-based real-estate school taxation. Cyber [charter schools](#) are paid by these differential rates, but does it cost as much to educate a cyber charter student in Philadelphia and Huntingdon when they're both online? This is the key to being able to properly compensate cyber charters for each child."

State legislatures would be wise to get into the business of monitoring how much money cyber charters are actually spending on marketing, advertising, curricular materials and lobbying, Carr-Chellman advises. "While some of these cyber charters are excellent solutions for some individuals, there's no doubt in my mind that funneling tax dollars to corporate-backed cyber charters is undermining the public good of [public schools](#), and needs more careful oversight."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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