Connecting Learners or Isolating Individuals? The Social Justice Frames in the Cyber Charter Schools in Pennsylvania

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ABSTRACT

Cyber charter schools are online schools that deliver educational content to students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. These programs provide the entire schooling experience through remote access to a virtual learning environment. Since cyber charters are a new educational platform, there is limited scholarly research discerning if they promote or detract from social justice in education. In mainstream dialogue, supporters hail cyber charters as providers of a quality education to students dissatisfied by their traditional school settings. For opponents, the schools are framed as providers of inadequate academic outcomes with a lack of social opportunity. To synthesize these disparate arguments, the authors examine Pennsylvania cyber charter website content and news stories in the popular press. The authors then discuss how these arguments relate to a social justice framework, considering potential implications for both Pennsylvania and outside entities who may wish to implement cyber charter schools in their local context.

Keywords: Cyber Charter School, Cyber School, Digital Divide, E-Learning, Equity, Ethics in Education, Online Education, Online Learning, Rights, Social Justice, Virtual School

INTRODUCTION

A cyber charter is a publically funded, privately operated school that provides formal education to students ranging from Kindergarten to 12th grade. Using public funds, cyber charters provide students the technology and materials to receive course content online from their homes. The schools are vital in the K-12 online education movement that has emerged in the United States during the past 10 years. More than 30 states plus Washington, D.C. have at least one fulltime online school, enrolling more than 275,000 students in 2011-12 (Watson et al., 2012). While the movement is certainly relevant to policymakers in the United States, the topic will be of increasing interest to international audiences because at least one of the providers of cyber charters in Pennsylvania (K12 Incorporated) has started an international branch with sights set on enrolling students abroad.

The word “cyber” captures the online aspect of the schools while the word “charter” indicates that the schools are choice-based alternatives to traditional settings (for further charter ex-
planations see: Budde, 1989 or Chubb & Moe, 1990). The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is important in the cyber charter movement because it is a forerunner in online enrollment and has encountered much controversy while doing so. This paper will use Pennsylvania cyber charters as a case to analyze disparate statements about considerations of the schools within frameworks of social justice.

Intuitively, cyber charters lay within a fundamental paradox related to issues of social justice in education. In one regard, the schools can be hailed as great equalizers because they allow students to engage with content they may not have been capable of accessing prior to enrollment in an online setting, which in turn can diminish inequality caused by geographic boundaries. Conversely, even though users have access to more information, they sacrifice their ability to engage with a sufficient amount of physical resources, which can manifest itself through limited prospects of receiving basic services such as food, socialization, and emotional support.

The above paradox highlights potential positive and negative ramifications of K-12 online education, but cyber charters in Pennsylvania have developed in such a way that actual ramifications can be observed to see if the schools enhance or exacerbate social justice. In 2011-12, Pennsylvania’s combination of “mega” and “mom and pop” cyber charters enrolled more than 30,000 students, which ranked the Commonwealth third in enrollment in the United States (DeJarnatt, 2013; Watson et al., 2012). As cyber charters have grown in Pennsylvania, concerns emerged academically, financially, and politically.

The academic concerns are highlighted in that no cyber charter received a passing score on the Commonwealth’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) metric in 2011-12 (Niederberger, 2013). Additionally, a 2011 report by Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) showed that enrollees in Pennsylvania cyber charters had statistically significant lower learning gains in both math and reading compared to traditional students. While standardized tests and AYP statuses can only provide a glimpse of academic performance, they initiate concerns about possible poor academic practices. Furthermore, various think tanks and media outlets have released reports that question the day-to-day activities of the schools (Miron & Urschel, 2012; Niederberger, 2012; Niederberger, 2013; Saul, 2012).

The financial and political issues arose when the Pennsylvania Auditor General released a report in 2012 that showed that the cyber charter funding formula depletes local school district funds, hurting traditional schools (Wagner, 2012). The concerns about cyber charters peaked on January 28, 2013 when Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, Ron Tomalis, denied all applications for new cyber charters. In a press release the Department stated that the rejection happened due to “significant deficiencies in curriculum, finance, and overall operations” and “cyber charter schools and learning centers are not to be used as an alternative to the brick-and-mortar model” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013).

Amongst the backdrop of both increased enrollment and heightened controversy, this paper examines cyber charters and considers their position in both the promotion and exacerbation of social justice in education. Because cyber charters are a new form of education, providers and supporters (namely the school websites) have made statements that suggest the schools can improve social justice in education throughout the Commonwealth, while opponents (namely popular media articles) suggest the schools promote unjust educational practices. With these considerations, this study examines two fundamental questions: What are the arguments in the statements that articulate suggestions that cyber charters promote social justice in education? What are the arguments in the statements that articulate that cyber charters detract from social justice? This study uses qualitative document analysis techniques to identify statements about cyber charter schools that address both questions. Then, based on the findings, the authors consider and discuss the best ways to manage the growth of cyber charter schools so their implementation promotes social justice rather than detracts from it.
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