



# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
June 18, 2010 Friday  
Main Edition

## **Cyberschool decision due; Commission weighs benefit for Georgia of more virtual classrooms.**

**BY:** D. Aileen Dodd  
**SECTION:** METRO NEWS; Pg. 1B

No need for back-to-school clothes or name tags. Not even a ride on a yellow school bus.

A group of enterprising Internet educators have been waiting a year to give Georgia public school students and teachers the state's first virtual k-12 experience, the chance to work and learn from home full-time. Today, they get an answer.

Months ago, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission delayed a vote on petitions for five new cybercampuses so board members could investigate the idea and its impact on public school funding.

The questions:

Can virtual charters serve students well?

How do you make the schools accountable for students they may never see in person?

Are costs to provide kids with home computers and Internet connections comparable to providing them with traditional classrooms?

"We don't really have a benchmark," said Mark Peevy, the commission's executive director. "We were working hard to establish what we hope is the right funding level to make it worthwhile for these schools to operate while balancing taxpayer dollars. We need to make sure we are not building in a profit base unnecessarily."

After researching the rise of virtual charter schools nationally and talking money with the staff of Gov. Sonny Perdue, the commissioner will announce today which schools the state will approve. The State Department of Education has already recommended approving two, Kaplan Academy of Georgia and Provost Academy Georgia; but more charters could be granted.

The vote could open the door to wider school choices for families and new employment opportunities for teachers.

But the announcement also could spell more financial troubles for local cash-strapped school systems. Suddenly, thousands of home-school students could return to public school funding rosters to enroll in cyber charters.

"You have lots of kids from all over the state in virtual schools that local systems are not even aware of,"

said Herb Garrett, executive director of the Georgia School Superintendents Association. "Local school districts could very quickly find money deducted from their already diminished allotment sheet, and they had no chance to approve or deny these charter schools. It's just open season on local school funding."

Randi St. Denis, president of the Home Educators Encouragement Alliance, which holds expos attracting thousands of home-schoolers, says families in her network have kids in a number of national cyber schools and in the state's first k-8 virtual charter, the Georgia Cyber Academy, which has 5,000 students from 162 school districts.

Virtuals are a natural first step for home-school families because they provide the learning tools free.

Renee Lord, a former teacher, said she spent about \$2,500 on home-school curriculum for her two kids before switching to Georgia Cyber Academy. "I have the support I didn't have when I was doing it on my own," Lord said. "I also can see how my children compare to their peers."

In 2009-10, there were nearly 42,000 home-school students in Georgia. Another 105,650 students were in private schools. All are potential customers who might be attracted to free individualized cyberlessons and the ability to work at their own pace.

However, academic concerns plague virtual charter contenders. Three proposed statewide virtuals that had partnered with education management companies were turned down because they lacked high accountability goals for student achievement.

Department of Education staff said Georgia Connections Academy, a k-12 model, set "low standards" but had expected to educate nearly 4,000 students by 2014. Mercury Online School of Georgia, also k-12, was denied for accountability reasons and because staff determined its board was too closely tied to its for-profit management partner, Mosaica of Atlanta.

Similar problems were suggested with Georgia Cyber Academy's proposed high school and its partner, K 12. Staff said the school also did not tie student performance goals to graduation rates or SAT scores or offer enhanced accountability, but still planned to educate 6,000 by 2014.

The state also stalled Georgia Cyber Academy's k-8 school from applying to become a commission charter school because scores on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test fell short of goals in its contract.

Officials at the school are confident the state will reconsider, however.

"We set some very aggressive goals for this year in our charter based on the results," said Matt Arkin, Georgia Cyber Academy's head of school. "We expect to exceed 29 out of 33 of the goals for grades 3 to 8, missing the remainder by an average of only 1 percent each."

The two virtuals already recommended for approval do not offer the k-12 experience. Provost proposes a high school and Kaplan Academy grades 4-12.

Commission schools are typically funded with state and federal dollars plus a matching local share taken from the state allocations of districts where students leave for charters. The funding mix for virtuals will likely be less because they don't have the facility costs of brick-and-mortar schools.

Still, executives at the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) hope Georgia funds virtuals at the same rate as other charters, as Pennsylvania and California do, or at least hits the national average of \$6,500 per student. (Georgia Cyber Academy currently receives about \$3,500 per student.)

But commission officials, having already been sued over funding, are hesitant.

"My guess is it will not be at the equal level of funding for a brick-and-mortar school," Peavy said. "We

don't want to put more on the table than it takes to operate."

#### Virtual schools

Twenty-four states plus Washington, D.C., allow cyber charters and they enroll more than 200,000 students. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter School, however, typical charter students prefer learning in real classrooms. About 1.3 million charter school students --- 86 percent, attend brick-and-mortar schools.

While many Georgia school districts have virtual school, there is only one charter offering a k-8 virtual experience. Georgia Cyber Academy is expecting 6,000 students in the fall. It has a waiting list of 700.

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