Miscounted students; State owes $263,000 to online school

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Since it opened six years ago, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow has never miscounted its enrollment and been owed money.

Instead, eCOT has been forced several times to repay money it collected for students who didn't really attend.

But after an Ohio Department of Education audit of its enrollment, the 6,600-student online charter school will collect $263,245 from the state, which in 2003 didn't pay eCOT for all of the students it taught.

The audit released last week showed eCOT had been underpaid $645,609 for 2003, but was overpaid $154,701 in 2002 and $227,662 in 2005.

Last year's discrepancy of students who were counted but not taught shouldn't be seen as evidence of continuing tracking problems, said eCOT spokesman Nick Wilson.

"We've become a lot more efficient in documenting enrollment and attendance over the years," Wilson said. "We think it's working well now."

The overpayments for last school year represent about 40 students who enrolled but didn't attend, he said. ECOT, which enrolls students statewide, will receive about $39 million in state per-pupil funds this year. Charter schools are publicly funded but can be privately run.

Online schools such as eCOT give students a computer to do schoolwork online guided by teachers who communicate with them largely through e-mail and online chats.

The school has been overpaid several times for students it counted but did not teach. Until a 2003 agreement that spelled out when students could be considered enrolled (when they log on and turn in their first assignment), the state and school were at odds over how much eCOT should be paid.

The most notable overpayment was in 2001, when eCOT owed the state $1.6 million. It was given three years to pay the amount off, and it did.

The enrollment problems at eCOT highlight how hard it is to track how many students are enrolled and logging on, said Education Department spokesman J.C. Benton.

"Online education is an emerging trend," Benton said. "It's unchartedterritory and there's lots of questions being answered as we go along."

It's clear, he said, that eCOT is getting better at tracking its students, in part because of the funding agreement and a new statewide student-tracking system that assigns every student a unique number that follows them from school to school.

In the recent enrollment audit, which the Education Department conducts periodically on all public schools, 524 files checked from 2005 found only 14 "no-shows," or students who signed up with the online school but never logged on to the eCOT computer system.

Some of the problems of previous years, including collecting funding for students who were enrolled for short periods of time, weren't problems last year.

Financial audits of the school for fiscal years 2004 and 2005 are expected to be made public this month.