



The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
July 10, 2009 Friday
Main Edition

Odyssey School's charter renewed; State board gives approval for it and cyber partner.

BY: D. Aileen Dodd
SECTION: METRO NEWS; Pg. 5B

No need to buy back-to-school clothes for about 5,000 Georgia kids this fall.

Students of an enterprising k-8 charter school that draws kids online from 163 Georgia districts can continue learning in their pajamas.

The state Board of Education on Thursday unanimously renewed the charter for Odyssey School of Coweta County and its cyber partner, the Georgia Virtual Academy, for two more years.

"Virtual learning is certainly the thing of the future," state school board member Linda Zechmann said in a committee meeting. "This school is unique in the choice it offers to parents across the state."

The charter extension came after close scrutiny of the school's performance on standardized tests. Georgia Virtual Academy, which joined Odyssey two years ago offering online instruction, caused the state-chartered special school to fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress goals for students in 2007-08. The school missed the mark in test participation and math scores for students with disabilities and the poor.

Matt Arkin, head of school for GVA, said it took some time for students to adjust to virtual learning and decide whether the program was right for them. About 44 percent of GVA's inaugural classes were composed of home schoolers.

"In eighth grade, 83 percent of students who entered GVA came behind one full year in math and 55 percent of students came two years behind in math," Arkin said. "We were able to catch up many of them. ... We are looking forward to the release of the AYP list for this year."

Andrew Broy, a state associate superintendent who oversees charter schools, said limiting the renewal to two years would allow the board to check in on the school's progress.

State board member Brian Burdette called Odyssey a "guinea pig" that should be given some leeway to perform. "They are paving the way," he said.

The charter renewal process, however, nixed Odyssey's June appeal to the state that it be free to petition the Georgia Charter Schools Commission for reauthorization, which would have brought it more money. Odyssey receives about \$3,100 per pupil as a state-chartered school. As a commission-chartered school, however, it also would qualify for matching local funds carved from state allocations paid to the 163 districts the school draws from.

Arkin said Odyssey, which opened on a Coweta campus in 2004, will move to become a commission school next so it can expand its offerings. "Virtual schools in other states are able to offer students art, music, foreign language, additional teachers," Arkin said. "We would be able to get more on par with [them]."

Meanwhile, the school will receive federal funds for the first time this fall. The state board unanimously agreed to grant it more than \$572,000 for the education of the poor. About half the school's enrollment qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch.

Arkin said the funds will help GVA hire 10 Title I teachers. GVA will have a total of 100 instructors working from their homes in August.

Reprinted with permission from [The Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#)