

Cyber Charter Schools in Pennsylvania



Nationally, Pennsylvania is regarded as a leader in the development of online charter public schools. The state's first "brick and mortar" public charter school opened in 1997, and its first cyber public charter school began operation in 1998. Currently, there are 12 cyber public charter schools serving more than 10,000 students, and enrollment is increasing exponentially. Some highlights of Pennsylvania's 12 operating cyber charter schools include:

- PA Learners Online CS was started by 10 school districts, and is administered by an intermediate unit.
- Eight Pennsylvania cyber charter schools were started by local school districts.
- Currently, six Pennsylvania cyber charter schools are operating independently of local school districts.
- Five Pennsylvania cyber charter schools were created under the new cyber charter school law (Act 88 of 2002).
- Seven Pennsylvania cyber charter schools that received their charters through a local school district have renewed or will be seeking renewal of their charters from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) from 2002 through 2006.
- All 12 Pennsylvania cyber charter schools have independent Boards of Trustees that are organized as 501(c)(3) organizations, and are subject to the regulations and governance of the PA State Ethics Commission, the state *Sunshine Laws* that govern all public school boards, and the Auditor General's oversight powers.

Cyber Public Charter Schools FAQ

Q What is a cyber charter school?

A cyber charter school is a charter school that "uses technology in order to provide and deliver a significant portion of its curriculum to its students through the Internet . . . or other electronic means" (24 P.S. §17-1703-A). A full explanation of Pennsylvania's June 2002 Cyber Charter School Law entitled Act 88 can be found in Cyber Charter Schools, Section 14. Article XVII-A, along with the following significant changes to the original law, Act 22 of 1997, can be found at PDE's Web site (<http://www.pde.state.pa.us/>).

1. New cyber charter schools must apply for their charters from PDE.
2. All existing cyber charter schools must have their charters renewed by PDE when their charters expire.
3. PDE is responsible for the oversight of new charters and renewed cyber charters.

Q What makes a cyber charter school different from a brick and mortar charter school?

1. Students may work from home or any off-site location, with instruction and curriculum being delivered via the Internet. Cyber charter schools may utilize real time, live conferences and seminars, however the Internet or other electronic means must be used to deliver a significant portion of instruction to students.
2. Savings from building maintenance, transportation, cafeteria supervision, and other costs associated with operating a brick and mortar school are used to provide technology and individualized curriculum. In addition to daily instruction delivered by technology, students are provided with curriculum, textbooks, and manuals.

3. Teachers may be recruited from all over the state, thereby providing a greater pool of talent, as opposed to talent found in only one geographic area.
4. When students are in class, they are totally engaged. Time spent in homework, waiting in cafeteria lines, and changing classes are not factors in a cyber charter school.
5. Parents are more involved in their child's education, partnering with them for success. Parents are the on-site educational mentors that supervise the student in the home. Besides enhancing academic achievement, this arrangement can help build strong families.
6. Students may work at an individualized pace to match their learning style and needs. The full spectrum of student needs, from gifted education to special education, can be accommodated.
7. More courses are available because cyber charter schools can partner with educational institutions such as community colleges.
8. Computer technology permits ongoing student assessment and accountability. Less time may be needed for grading, which can mean more time for instructional staff to facilitate student success.

Q What is unique about cyber charter schools?

1. Cyber charter schools can partner with local, state, and national organizations to provide specialized courses such as Latin, Chinese, Microbiology, Geology, and others.
2. Many courses are more rigorous than standard school courses, providing additional enrichment opportunities that can include taking advanced placement courses such as the CLEP test, or courses for college/university credit.
3. Cyber charter schools can provide a variety of real time learning environments including online instruction virtual classrooms, breakout chatrooms, individual instruction, and daily e-mail and message board interaction.
4. Cyber charter schools can provide course work that is instantly graded where results can be made available to students and parents immediately.
5. Under the flexibility of the state's charter school teacher certification law, individuals with life experience in their discipline can teach courses. Experts in their fields who are not certified teachers can also teach courses such as technology, fine arts, science, and law. For example, many college and university professors are not certified to teach K-12, but they are highly qualified experts in their discipline. Still, 75% of all cyber charter schoolteachers must hold valid Pennsylvania teaching certification.
6. Experts throughout the world can communicate with and instruct the cyber school student.
7. Teachers can utilize resources and techniques that enable all students to keep abreast of their schoolwork, including regular e-mail contact, video conferencing, and telephone conversations with parents or guardians.
8. Cyber charter schools can partner with a variety of online curriculum resources. They can design their own courses using course material from an unlimited number of Internet-related educational and entrepreneurial sources.

Q What improvements did Act 88 of 2002 (Pennsylvania's Cyber Public Charter School Law) make?

Act 88 defined cyber charter schools, and permitted the authorization of a cyber school by requiring it to obtain a charter from PDE. Previously, a district or several school districts could issue a charter permitting the cyber charter school to enroll students from anywhere in Pennsylvania. This set the stage for a challenge to the constitutionality of the charter school law. The Pennsylvania School Board Association filed an identical suit in 15 courts throughout Pennsylvania in an attempt to permanently cease operations of all cyber charter schools.

Under Act 88, PDE is the only entity that can grant a charter for the creation of a cyber charter school. This eliminated the concern that a small local school district, ill-equipped to oversee a state-wide school, could be allowed to establish a new cyber charter school. The new law also allowed for a much easier process of collecting funding from their students' home school districts.





How are cyber schools funded? How much do they cost?

1. Cyber charter schools are funded the same way as brick and mortar charter schools. A “Selected Expenditure Per Student” accompanies each cyber charter school student from his or her school district of residence. Based on a formula that includes a district’s annual budgeted expenditures, the Selected Expenditure Per Student averages approximately 80% of what the district of residence spends for each student.
2. The Pennsylvania State Legislature has appropriated funding to reimburse school districts for each student of residence attending a charter school (including a cyber charter school). This amounts to approximately 30% of the school district payment that is sent to charter schools.

School districts of residence of charter school students retain about half the amount they would spend for each charter school student, without the cost incurred by educating the student.

3. Under Act 22, the old charter school law, the school district could dispute billing and withhold funding to a cyber school with no penalty. Under Act 88, student residency disputes do not stop payments to the cyber charter school.
4. Billing procedures between cyber charter schools and school districts under the old law were not clearly established. During the 2002-2003 school year, PDE clarified the billing procedure, which shortened the delay of payments from PDE to the cyber charter schools when the school district withheld payments. See PDE’s Web site for current student enrollment and school notification forms (www.pde.state.pa.us).

Page 1 of the Charter School Student Enrollment Notification Form PDE 7/2002. Instructions for this form can be found at www.pde.state.pa.us. Under the K-12 Schools folder, click on “Public Schools,” then “Charter Schools,” then “Reporting.”

5. A significant number of school districts routinely withhold funding based on philosophical differences with cyber charter schools. In turn, PDE withholds this funding from the school districts of residence. Unfortunately, this process can take many months, thereby causing severe cash flow problems for cyber charter schools.



Do cyber charter schools need the same funding as brick and mortar charter schools?

Yes. Cyber charter schools may save money in building and maintenance costs, but they incur additional costs not associated with a brick and mortar school. Specifically, the law requires cyber charter schools to provide the following for each student:

1. computer/monitor/keyboard/printer
2. Internet connection
3. online/text curriculum
4. shipping/receiving of all materials to the student’s home
5. technical support for all computer/Internet-related issues
6. special education-related services that go into the home
7. statewide testing centers for the administration of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests
8. staffing to create billing/gathering of information from up to 501 school districts each month.



Other major expenses cyber charter schools incur above the normal costs for teachers/curriculum/student services may include:

1. statewide field trips: costs for students to attend and expenses for staff to travel
2. statewide local offices/locations for interviews/testing/training
3. textbooks, manuals, and companion materials
4. partnerships with online companies that provide curriculum and/or instruction for core curriculum and specialized courses
5. high speed Internet connections to facilitate video conferencing, virtual classrooms, and graphic intensive curricula
6. some local offices/school facilities to support live teaching for conferences, language studies, and gifted and performing arts programs.

Q Who attends cyber charter schools?

Cyber charter schools are public schools and must accept all students who apply. A sampling of students that attend cyber charter schools includes:

- a student who is on the Jr. Olympic Fencing Team. At age 12, she has already received two full university scholarships
- a student with severe asthma
- foster twins who are at least two years behind in schooling, but who are bright and need the opportunity to work at an accelerated pace to catch up
- two girls, grades 5 and 7 respectively, who live in an area where their parents think it is unsafe to attend school
- a 12th grader who struggles academically and wants to be a firefighter; for him, cyber charter schools represent the best way to obtain his high school diploma
- a 7th grader who is already two years ahead of her peers and wants to continue her accelerated learning
- a 4th grader who suffers from a neurological condition, functions normally at home, but cannot work in an environment with too much auditory stimulation
- a home-schooled 10th grader whose parents want the opportunity to have outside teachers and accredited curriculum choices for their daughter.

Q What does the teaching/student-teacher interaction look like in the typical cyber charter school?

Often, time spent on tasks in traditional public schools is shorted by administrative matters such as fire drills, assemblies, and passage from one class to another. Furthermore, given the large numbers of students in each class, students are forced to work at the pace of the group, sitting passively and listening to group instruction. Conversely, cyber charter school students are always involved in interactive learning. They may be simultaneously engaged in skills such as writing, communication, computer, quantitative, thinking and problem solving, and typing. In addition, the curriculum and educational programming companies with whom cyber charter schools often partner have spent millions of dollars developing curriculum and programs that are interactive and innovative. This type of environment tends to motivate and actively engage students. Cyber charter schools reduce or eliminate:

- roll call
- recess
- lunch
- trip time to and from school
- discipline issues
- time changing classes
- sick days
- snow days
- homeroom
- study halls
- time spent getting children ready for school
- fire drills.

The extra time throughout each day can be spent by actively completing assigned work or by exploring subject areas in depth. More importantly, a student can work at an individual rate, often progressing more rapidly than in traditional settings.

Q Who holds cyber charter schools accountable for delivering a quality instructional program?

Cyber charter schools have more levels of accountability than regular public schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. There are four main levels of accountability:

1. **Public cyber charter schools are authorized by PDE:** Each cyber charter school must be approved by PDE. The Board that approves each of these schools is comprised of department heads or top PDE administrators. The requirement(s) for obtaining a charter include:
 - a. an application developed by PDE that requires demonstrated competence in every aspect of school operation
 - b. a hearing before the School Application Board granted by the PA Secretary of Education
 - c. a series of resubmissions for each school to demonstrate, among other things, knowledge of delivering instruction electronically, the ability to identify and deliver curriculum that meets state standards, and the ability to provide instruction for special education students
 - d. detailed documentation and successful completion of the process of submission and resubmission of each application in order to satisfy PDE's rigorous standards

2. **Continuous oversight provided by PDE:** Each Cyber Charter School must submit numerous reports throughout the year, and a comprehensive annual report at the end of each year. PDE reviews each report and makes recommendations for improvement to each school. Schools that do not follow the recommendations risk losing their charter. Charters may be revoked at any time for cause and may not be renewed at the end of their term if the school is failing in significant areas. Extensive evaluations of each school are listed on PDE's website (www.pde.state.pa.us).
3. **Educational Marketplace:** If a school is failing to serve its students, the educational marketplace provides the accountability of student/family choice. Each cyber charter school is in competition with all other 11 PA cyber charter schools, regular public schools and brick and mortar charter schools.
4. **Professional Standards:** Cyber charter schools are professional organizations, with the accountability structure. Each cyber charter school has its own independent board of directors responsible for personnel matters of the school. One cyber charter school board chairman is a former Pennsylvania superintendent of schools. Several cyber charter school CEOs are current or former superintendents of schools. All cyber charter schools are members of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools, which networks with cyber charter schools and provides legal and program assistance to its members. Legal support is provided from the three leading Pennsylvania law firms specializing in charter school law. Program support is facilitated by former Pennsylvania superintendents and PDE administrators



Additionally:

- All cyber charter schools must develop and implement a professional development plan (Act 84) and a mentoring plan for new teachers.
- All cyber charter schools must meet certification requirements of all Pennsylvania Charter Schools.
- Many cyber charter school teachers and administrators have graduate and doctorate degrees.
- CEOs in nine of the 12 cyber charter schools hold doctorate degrees.

Q Are Cyber Charter schools operated by for-profit organizations?

No. All cyber charter schools are operated by local, independent boards of directors who have full authority to operate the school. Organized as a 501(c)(3), or a public nonprofit organization, cyber charter school boards have the power to hire and fire employees, and are charged with the complete fiscal and educational oversight of the school. However, similar to all public schools, cyber charter schools often contract with local, regional, and national companies to help them deliver the finest instruction available. Corporate partners include Pearson Learning; Saxon; Modern Curriculum Press; Keystone Learning; Houghton Mifflin; Compass Learning Odyssey Online; Scott Foresman; Powerglide K-12; McGraw Hill; White Hat Management; Prentice Hall; United Streaming; Sylvan Learning; National Geographic; History Channel; and Glencoe. Similar to brick and mortar charter schools, cyber charter schools can utilize Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) to provide educational and school operation services. This partnership with for-profit companies to provide school management services is allowed in Act 22 of 1997, and Act 88 of 2002. Further, this provision was upheld in the 2000 Pennsylvania Supreme Court Decision of West Chester Area School District v. Collegium Charter School. Currently, three of the 12 public cyber charter schools are using EMOs to manage their schools.

Q How could Pennsylvania's Cyber Charter School Law be strengthened?

Lengthening the charter renewal term for all charter schools to ten years can strengthen the law. Currently, charter schools spend a great deal of time and administrative effort preparing charter renewals every five years. Furthermore, securing funding and financial commitments for the leasing of technology, leasehold improvements and capital construction projects in such a short time frame is extremely challenging. Allowing for a longer initial charter period would enable schools to spend more time teaching, and less time on administrative and financial details. This is especially true in schools that have demonstrated success, and those that have established themselves in their community and sponsoring school districts.