Virtual Failure: The Growth of Online Charter Schools

Prepared By: Maine Education Association, Government Relations Department
Virtual Failure:
The Growth of Online Charter Schools Hurts Students and Communities

Introduction
Governor LePage and the 125th Maine Legislature launched an all-out assault on Maine’s public schools. While the Governor claims to want to focus on education, the policies he supports do the exact opposite. The Governor’s push to open virtual schools in this state will not only take away key funding from our public schools, but will hurt students. The Governor’s push comes after his first budget failed to fund 55% of the cost of public schools as voters demanded. The Governor’s budget has shortchanged our public schools by more than $150 million. The result: larger class sizes, fewer teachers and programs for our kids and higher property taxes across Maine communities to make up for the lack of state funding. The money we do have to spend on schools needs to focus on what’s lacking already and not new ventures proven to fail, like virtual schools.

Two of the largest for-profit virtual school companies are applying again this year to open schools in Maine, despite a failed attempt last year. It is imperative this process stalls before it goes anywhere, if we as Mainers want to protect our public schools and our students. Research shows virtual schools fail students. Virtual students drop out more. Virtual students score lower on tests. Virtual students cost more as districts pay for them twice, once to the out-of-state company running the school and then again when that student drops out online and returns to the traditional brick-and-mortar school. Virtual schools take funding away from public schools making it harder for our schools to give each child the top notch education they deserve.

This is the wrong direction for Maine. Instead of opening virtual schools, we need to focus on funding our schools that do work to keep our students competitive in a changing world.

Summary of Findings

- Virtual school students fall behind their brick-and-mortar peers. According to the New York Times, in Pennsylvania only 42% of virtual school students tested at grade level compared to 75% of brick-and-mortar school students.

- Only 27.4% of online schools were able to meet the No Child Left Behind Law goals. Comparatively, 51.4% of brick-and-mortar schools made Adequate Yearly Progress.

- In addition to “dropout” rate concerns a paltry 12% of Colorado Virtual Academy’s students graduated on-time while 72% of Colorado Public School students graduated on-time, according to the Washington Post.

- Online students are losing ground. Students who transfer to online programs from brick-and-mortar schools posted lower scores on annual state reading exams after entering their virtual classrooms.

- Academic performance declined after students enrolled in online programs. Students who stayed in online programs long enough to take two years worth of state reading exams actually saw their test results decline over time.

- Wide gaps persist. Double-digit gaps in achievement on state exams between online students and their peers in traditional schools persist in nearly every grade and subject – and they’re widest among more affluent schools.

“As educators we cannot let virtual charter schools open in Maine. There is too much research that proves these schools fail our students while turning pupils into profits for out-of-state companies. Virtual Schools are not the way we should spend taxpayer dollars and they are not the way to create a learning environment where students can succeed.”

- Lois Kilby-Chesley, Maine Education Association President
The Growth of Online Learning

Over the course of a decade, online “virtual” learning has grown from a novelty used by just a few school districts to supplement the curriculum to a full-fledged movement to supplant the classroom. In a virtual school there are no classrooms and students have little or no face-to-face contact with a teacher. Across the country, state entities, school districts, home-schooling advocates and private corporations are partnering to offer virtual schools as an alternative to community-based, brick-and-mortar schools. A quarter of a million students are now enrolled in full-time virtual charter schools in at least 30 states. And that number continues to grow at a steady rate.¹

This trend is extremely troubling. Resources that should be used to improve public schools are instead being diverted to virtual operations, run by out-of-state corporations profiting on taxpayer-funded programs that have no proven track record of success. Data related to student performance in these new schools are just starting to become available. The research surfacing on the effectiveness of these schools and programs is worrisome. Students are being left behind. A recent study by Gene Glass and Kevin Welner at the University of Colorado raises major concerns about the expansion of virtual charter schools. In “Online K-12 Schooling in the U.S.: Uncertain Private Ventures in Need of Public Regulation,” Glass and Welner conclude:

“There exists no evidence from research that full-time virtual schooling at the K-12 level is an adequate replacement for traditional face-to-face teaching and learning.”²

Virtual school proponents are even questioning the effectiveness of the full-time virtual school model. Tim Booker, a member of the school board for the Colorado Virtual Academy, operated by K12 Inc., recently told the Wall Street Journal that “the jury’s still out” when it comes to virtual schools and he too has “deep concerns about whether full-time cyber schools are a viable model.”³

The Maine Charter School Commission is now debating whether full-time, taxpayer-funded virtual charters should be able to operate here. Two of the largest national online school operators, K12 Inc. and Connections Academy, have both submitted applications to operate large, virtual academies under the guise of Maine Virtual Academy and Maine Connections Academy, respectively. Before the Commission rushes ahead to approve an online charter, a review of the recent research on virtual schools is warranted.⁴

Who are K12 Inc. and Connections Academy?

K12 Inc. is the country’s largest provider of full-time public virtual schools.⁵ The organization recently reported revenue of more than $500 million. According to recent publications, that’s an increase of 36% over the previous year. After a series of acquisitions, the company turned a profit of $12.8 million in fiscal year 2010, according to the Washington Post.⁶

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³ “My Teacher is an App”, Stephanie Banchero and Stephanie Simon, Wall Street Journal Nov. 12, 2011
⁴ Please note, the intention of this paper is to review the research on full-time, virtual charter schools, specifically schools operated by either K12 Inc or Connections Academy. Both have applied for applications to operate virtual schools in Maine. There is ample research on the effectiveness of blended or hybrid virtual schools. For example, many public schools in Maine already have arrangements to provide specific courses through arrangements with online providers. In most cases, teachers are assigned to monitor a student’s performance and to provide guidance to struggling students. However, the applications submitted by K12 Inc and Connections Academy to the Charter School Commission focus on the development of full time charter schools and the purpose of this paper is to review the recent studies concerning such schools.
The CEO is Ronald J. Packard, a former banker at Goldman Sachs. Packard earned over $2.6 million in total compensation last year.

A recent profile in the New York Times focused on the behavior and business model of K12 Inc. In the thoroughly researched report, the author described K12 Inc. as a “company that tries to squeeze profits from public school dollars by raising enrollment, increasing teacher workload and lowering standards.”

Connections Academy is a for-profit venture based in Baltimore, Maryland and is another leading virtual school company. In 2010, Connections Academy, reported revenue of $120 million and average annual growth of 35%. In 2011, the company was bought by British publishing giant, Pearson, for $400 million.

In a candid interview in 2010, the CEO of Connections Academy explained their business model and how they turn a profit by enrolling massive numbers of students. Her answer ignores any mention of high quality schools and a valuable educational experience and instead focuses solely on growth and profits. Here is her response to the question of how Connections Academy schools make money:

“The reason we can make money is really very simple: It’s scale. We’re serving 20,000 students. That allows us to take our overhead and spread it out, and as we get bigger we’ll have the opportunity to become more profitable. Most people have this reaction that ‘Why should you have a for-profit company involved in public education?’ But every company connected to public schools — from the cafeteria to textbooks — are all making a profit.”

Review of the Research: Online Schools are Failing Our Students

Student Performance – Cyber Students Moving Backwards

Students who attend online schools are failing. Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) recently released a report detailing student performance in Pennsylvania’s charter schools, including cyber charters. The report gathered academic progress data over four years and the analysis included more than 70,000 students in 116 charter schools across the state. The research is clear. All eight of the online schools analyzed in the study performed “significantly worse” than brick-and-mortar charter schools. Students in the online schools also performed worse than students in traditional public schools in both reading and math.

The failure is particularly startling considering, according to the report, the cyber students with poor performances had demographic advantages over traditional charter school students in Pennsylvania. Still, cyber students’ performance did not exceed that of the traditional student. For example, the report found “the typical cyber charter student is white and ineligible for subsidized meals, while the typical brick-and-mortar charter student is black and receiving free- or reduced-lunch prices. Furthermore, the starting score for cyber students is significantly higher than for brick-and-mortar charter students in both reading and math.” Despite these advantages, cyber charters still failed to match the results for traditional public schools and brick-and-mortar charters. This data underscores the troubles of cyber charters.

It is clear from the Stanford University study that the cyber schools are generally starting with more affluent children...
who are better prepared, yet still perform worse than schools that are educating children who start farther behind and are from families with greater economic hardship. The research manager for the study, Devora Davis, was reported as saying, “What we can say right now is that whatever they are doing in Pennsylvania is not working and should not be replicated.” To underscore her point, Ms. Davis was quoted in the New York Times as saying, “If [online students] were paired with a traditional public schools student, the public school student kept their pace in line, and the cyber student moved back five spots.”

Some virtual schools are also not able to meet federal standards by failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). A sample of online schools shows that only 27.4% were able to meet the goals established by the No Child Left Behind Law. In comparison, information from a National Education Policy Center publication shows that 51.4% of brick-and-mortar schools were successful in making AYP.

This same study illustrates the lack of success virtual schools associated with Connections Academy and K12 Inc. had in meeting AYP. Of the 14 virtual charter schools managed by Connections Academy around the country, only three were able to make AYP. The data are equally troubling for K12 Inc., where only 33 percent were able to meet AYP.

Perhaps most alarming is the number of states that have placed K12 Inc. schools on corrective action plans or have otherwise complained about the quality of education taking place in those schools. Texas Virtual Academy at Southwest, a K12 Inc. school in Houston, Texas, has been deemed “academically unacceptable” by the state. Another K12 Inc. school in Northglenn, Colorado, called the Colorado Virtual Academy has been placed on “priority improvement” status. Other schools, such as the Agora Cyber Charter in Pennsylvania, have been placed on a “correction action” plan by the state. These are just some examples of the failures of cyber charters.

Teachers also have major issues with the standards at certain cyber charters, saying they are just too lax. According to school board minutes attained by the New York Times, failing students at the Agora Cyber Charter were able to turn in past due assignments without penalty. In the same article, teachers reported that some assignments were left open for “unlimited retakes” and the schools new grading policy elevated students who did not return work to a score of a 50, rather than a zero. These practices lead one to question whether these virtual schools are lowering standards and adjusting grading in order to create an illusion of performance.

In Minnesota, the number of students enrolling in full-time online schools has tripped over five years, yet the results are truly disturbing. Students enrolled full time in online schools in fourth through eighth grade only showed about half the

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12 “The Cyber Attack on Public Schools” Maine Educator January 2012 Vol. 72 No. 5
16 Ibid. p. 50-52
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
The office of the Legislative Auditor also expressed concerns about the number of students exiting the programs.\textsuperscript{21} K12 Inc. virtual schools in Carroll County, Virginia, and the Agora Charter show similar trends. The Carroll County superintendent expressed concern at the poor test results of students and pointed to the fact that only 35\% of the seventh-grade students in their cyber school passed a state assessment, compared to 68\% of the students in a traditional school.\textsuperscript{22} At Agora, only 42\% of students tested at grade level or better in math, while 75\% of traditional students statewide were shown to be at least at grade level. In reading, only 52\% were at grade level in the cyber charter, while the statewide mark was 72\%.\textsuperscript{23}

The most significant research regarding cyber schools is from Colorado's efforts to evaluate that state's experimentation with online schools. Colorado now spends more than $100 million per year for students to attend online schools, yet the research is clear and overwhelmingly negative when evaluating student performance at these schools.

The I-News Network and Education News Colorado conducted an extensive, independent review of the schools. The findings worried education officials in the state.

- **Online students are losing ground.** Students who transfer to online programs from brick-and-mortar schools posted lower scores on annual state reading exams after entering their virtual classrooms.
- **Academic performance declined after students enrolled in online programs.** Students who stayed in online programs long enough to take two years worth of state reading exams actually saw their test results decline over time.
- **Wide gaps persist.** Double-digit gaps in achievement on state exams between online students and their peers in traditional schools persist in nearly every grade and subject – and they're widest among more affluent schools.\textsuperscript{1}

Leaders at certain cyber school chains will often cite the large number of at-risk students to explain their poor performance, or some may attribute a school's poor showing to students who enter the cyber school academically behind their peers. Yet the research from Colorado demonstrates otherwise.

Of the 10,000 students entering the online programs in Colorado, only about 120 students were identified as previous dropouts and only 290 entered the online school from an alternative school.\textsuperscript{24} In addition, the analysis looked at 2,400

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} “Profits and Questions at Online Charter Schools”, Stephanie Saul New York Times Dec. 12, 2011
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
students who completed a state standardized test the year before entering the online school. More than half of those students performed proficient or better.25 What’s more, the research clearly shows that “students eligible for federal lunch assistance in online programs perform worse than low-income students in traditional schools on state reading, writing and math exams.”26 To put it bluntly, the claims of the cyber school operators of a disadvantaged student population simply do not hold water. They do not have a student population that is more at risk than traditional schools and the cyber schools actually perform worse in educating children with the most need.

The K12 Inc. school in Colorado, the Colorado Virtual Academy, has fared no better than other virtual charters in the state. Despite having a student population that is more affluent and with a smaller minority population than public schools, the Virtual Academy performed far worse. Over seven years, the school’s test scores dropped and the state’s “academic growth indicators put student progress at 29 in math and 36 in reading, far below the state average of 50.”27 The poor performance of the school left even the school’s chairman to admit that board members were “very concerned.” The board even considered ending the contract that sends $22 million in public funding to K12 Inc. to operate the Colorado Virtual Academy.28

States are now questioning K12 Inc. testing results and practices. K12 Inc. was recently the defendant in a shareholder lawsuit. According to the Washington Post, a class action suit was filed because the company allegedly “violated securities law by making false statements to investors about students’ poor performance on standardized tests.”29 The suit also alleges K12 Inc. boosts revenues through “deceptive recruiting practices.”30

**Student “Dropout Rates”**

Student “dropout” rates at online schools are a cause for major concern. In 2010, only 12% of Colorado Virtual Academy’s more than 5,000 students graduated on time. Statewide, 72% of public school students graduated on time, according to the Washington Post.31 According to a study of Colorado virtual schools, the dropout rate in 2010 was four times higher than the state average. Colorado’s online schools “produced three times more dropouts than graduates,” which is the opposite of the statewide average of three graduates for every one dropout.32

At Ohio’s Virtual Academy, only 30% of the school’s 9,000 students graduated on time, compared to 78% of public school students. Both the Colorado and Ohio Virtual Academies are operated by K12 Inc.

K12 Inc. manages one of the largest cyber charters in Pennsylvania. Agora Cyber Charter started in 2005 and now enrolls over 8,000 students. Dramatic dropout rates and turnover continue to plague the school. As the Washington Post has reported, nearly 25% of the school’s 8,700 students left the school in the 2010-2011 school year. In fact, a teacher who taught at Agora for four years was quoted as saying, “New students were always coming in” and she went on to raise concern that the “churn” rate for students “made it difficult to be able to focus on the students I already had.”33

In Minnesota, the Office of the Legislative Auditor showed that 25% of high school seniors in virtual schools dropped out, according to The Wall Street Journal. In traditional schools a mere 3% of students enrolled dropped out.34

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 “Test Scores Raise Questions about Colorado Virtual Schools” Nancy Mitchell (Education News Colorado) and Burt Hubbard (I-News Network), Education Week Oct. 5, 2011
30 Ibid.
32 “Test Scores Raise Questions about Colorado Virtual Schools” Nancy Mitchell (Education News Colorado) and Burt Hubbard (I-News Network), Education Week Oct. 5, 2011
34 “My Teacher is an App”, Stephanie Banchero and Stephanie Simon, Wall Street Journal Nov. 12, 2011
The charts below outline the monthly student enrollment for two of the nation's largest online charter schools. Both schools have wild fluctuations in enrollment.

During the 2009-2010 school year, the Agora Charter had a “dropout rate” of over 35%. While the annual enrollment of students was 7,578, nearly 2,700 students left the school during the year and yet another 2,860 joined in the middle of the school year. In the month of October, the school added 688 students to its rolls, while in May it lost 268 students.

### Monthly Enrollment for Agora Cyber Charter in Pennsylvania During the 2009-2010 School Year

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| Withdrew                                 | 485    | 581    | 232    | 225    | 214    | 324    | 162    | 34     | 42     | 31     |
| Added                                    | 1163   | 874    | 221    | 62     | 130    | -115   | 17     | -66    | -24    | 31     |

### Total Enrollment

| Total Enrollment                          | 6456   |
| Churn                                    | 36.09% |
Research by the I-Network and Edweek News Colorado showed that half of the online students in the state leave within a year, and when they leave “they’re often further behind academically than when they started.”

In the fall of 2008, the largest online program in Colorado accounted for 10,500 students. Just a year later, 5,600 had left the school. And by October of 2010, only one quarter of the original students remained. The dropout rate is also squandering significant public resources. The same research shows due to the volatility of the student population, “at least $6 million annually went to online schools for students who weren’t there the entire academic year.” The continuous turnover of students led one author to suggest “that these cyber schools might as well have a turnstile as their logo for the volume of withdrawals they experience.”

Sometimes students do not leave the school, but instead are dropped by the school. A former principal at the online Insight School of Colorado in Julesburg alleges that “his former employers received millions of dollars in public school funding for students it then systematically dropped from its rolls before they were to take annual state exams.” A review of data from the school supports the principal’s claim. For example, while the school enrolled 586 students in October, the month when student count determines state funding levels, enrollment had plummeted by March. Fewer than half of the original students took the state exam. The local school district has threatened to sever ties with K12 Inc., the operator of the Insight School, due to poor performance of the students on state exams.

The constant “churn” of students also creates other obvious challenges. A special education teacher from the Agora School who resigned spoke of the daunting challenges of teaching when the enrollment is so volatile. She told a reporter, “If you weren’t trying to make initial [e-mail or phone] contact with new students then you were trying to keep on top of the ‘inactive’ [students who had not logged on to Agora’s web portal in a few days or confirm if students who had not been in contact with [teachers] for weeks or months were still enrolled].” She went on to say “when it came to the actual instruction, you’d be a secretary scheduling 10 minutes here and there for students who often had complex learning challenges.”

In addition, the constant “churn” of students creates a tremendous strain on the brick-and-mortar schools that must take the students back when they drop out of the online schools. The public schools often “must find money in their budgets to educate students who come from online schools midyear.” However, many of the return students need remedial services in order to catch up with their peers who remained in the brick-and-mortar schools. And they must do all of this with less money, since the virtual school has already been paid out at least some, if not all, of their fee. So while the virtual school makes money, the public school is left to pick up the pieces of its failure without having the funds to do so.

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35 “Test Scores Raise Questions about Colorado Virtual Schools” Nancy Mitchell (Education News Colorado) and Burt Hubbard (I-News Network), Education Week Oct. 5, 2011
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
39 “Investigation Finds Lax Oversight of Online Education” Nancy Mitchell (Education News Colorado) and Burt Hubbard (I-News Network), Education Week Oct. 6, 2011
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 “Test Scores Raise Questions about Colorado Virtual Schools” Nancy Mitchell (Education News Colorado) and Burt Hubbard (I-News Network), Education Week Oct. 5, 2011
Gary Miron, a professor of education at Western Michigan University, had a succinct explanation for the current turnover in online schools when he said, “The kids enroll. You get the money, the kids disappear.”

Without question the enrollment practices require greater scrutiny. There is no prohibition against online charters signing up students for the first few months of the year, and then allowing them to matriculate back to the public school. Such an ebb and flow of students causes serious financial instability for the sending school district. And in some cases, the online school may charge an “upfront fee” for books and other supplies – this is money a school district may never recoup.

**Attendance and Authenticity of Work**

Like all school environments, online students must be present to learn. At a traditional school the question of a student’s attendance is clear, but with online schools it is often harder to determine if a student is “present.”

In Colorado, for example, a review by state auditors of the Colorado Virtual Academy found that the school was charging for 120 students “whose enrollments could not be verified or who did not meet Colorado residency requirements. Some had never logged in.” The state eventually demanded the Colorado Virtual Academy reimburse more than $800,000 for the students that were not attending the school. A report from the I-Network and Education News Colorado alleges that, “millions of dollars are going to virtual schools for students who no longer attend online classes.”

Confirming online attendance is a major issue. A New York Times profile of the Agora Charter in Pennsylvania showed that attendance was such a problem in 2010 the school dropped 600 students for failure to attend, “149 of them just before state tests were administered, according to school board minutes.” In one recent article, the author received an e-mail from the head finance director at the Agora school in Pennsylvania. The director was complaining to staff about a special education student who had been declared “absent” for 141 days. Per the report, the student had never formally withdrawn, and so the sending school district was continuing to make payments to the virtual school. Teachers from Agora told the New York Times that students only need to log in to be declared present for the day, raising even more questions about what constitutes attendance at a virtual charter school.

Determining who is actually sitting in front of the computer or typing on the keyboard has been a considerable challenge for online schools as well. In some cases, online schools have to rely on the honor system for verification. For example, in California all students are required to complete physical education classes, but with no means of supervising the class, the K12 Inc. school relies on the students to self-report.

**Teacher Ratios and Teacher Certification**

K12 Inc. found itself in hot water regarding issues of teacher ratios and teacher certification. In Arizona, K12 Inc. was accused of “outsourcing” the teacher functions at its Arizona Virtual Academy to teachers from India. In Wisconsin, K12 Inc. was the subject of a lawsuit alleging circumvention of the state’s teacher certification law through claiming parents as the certified teachers for students. The Legislature then passed a law requiring greater scrutiny of online schools.

45 “Profits and Questions at Online Charter Schools” Stephanie Saul New York Times Dec. 12, 2011
46 “Profits and Questions at Online Charter Schools” Stephanie Saul New York Times Dec. 12, 2011
47 Ibid.
48 “Test Scores Raise Questions about Colorado Virtual Schools” Nancy Mitchell (Education News Colorado) and Burt Hubbard (I-News Network), Education Week
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
53 “K12 Inc. Scraps India Outsourcing” Andrew Trotter Education Week Sept. 10, 2008 (ref. Glass and Welner)
According to a recent article in the Portland Press Herald by Colin Woodward, K12 Inc. is under investigation by the Florida Department of Education for “allegations it used uncertified teachers and tried to get employees to assist in concealing that fact from school district officials.” The Press Herald goes on to quote an e-mail from Samantha Gilormini, K12’s Florida Virtual Program project manager, which says, “So if you see your name next to a student that might not be yours it’s because you were qualified to teach that subject and we needed to put your name there.”

The ratio of students to teachers varies widely by school. At K12 Inc.’s Virginia Virtual Academy, the advertised student-to-teacher ratio is 60 to 1. Yet, at other schools teachers have reported having as many as 270 students, “even though they had been told they would have 150.”

Teachers at the Agora Cyber Charter in Pennsylvania challenged K12 Inc.’s data, which claims a ratio of 49 students to each teacher. Jessica Long, an elementary teacher at the Agora school is quoted as saying, “I know on the elementary level we have anywhere from 70 to 100 (students). I don’t know anyone who has 50 students.”

With so many students, some teachers say they simply don’t have enough time to properly educate each student. Teachers in K12 Inc. schools in Colorado and Ohio claim they regularly supervise classes of 75 students, thus “leaving little more than 30 minutes a week to each student.”

The increased workload for teachers has serious, negative repercussions for the content of the curriculum. A former teacher at the Agora Charter and a parent of four Agora students explains her own child’s experience with the rapid class size growth:

“What has happened now in honors literature courses, the teachers are not able to keep up with 300 students, so they’ll just cut curriculum. The kids are losing out. This past week my son was exempted from ‘The Great Gatsby’ because of the workload of the teacher.”

Questions Regarding Oversight

States such as Pennsylvania have grown increasingly concerned about the lack of oversight for virtual charter schools. In June of 2010, the state threatened to revoke the charter of the state’s largest online school, Agora Cyber Charter, due to concerns regarding student performance and transparency.

The report from Glass and Welner also illustrates the variety of ways that online schools manage to escape public oversight. Following their review of practices across the country, the authors suggest four recommendations for policymakers to consider when debating the merits of an online charter school. Three of those recommendations seem relevant to the work of Maine’s Charter School Commission:

• **Authentication of Students’ Work.** The report cites issues with authentication of student work at online schools. In fact, at one online school in Denver, Colorado, students were found to be on other websites looking up the answers to questions. The CEO of the school was quoted as saying “…there is a relatively limited amount that [the online school] can do to prevent students from utilizing the web to go look up answers.”

• **Fiscal and Instructional Regulations.** Given the careless approach to teacher certification found by certain online schools in other states, the authors conclude policymakers should be very clear of the

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56 Virginia Virtual Academy, K-12 and Carroll County Public Schools http://www.education.virginia.gov/docs/VirginiaVirtualAcademySummary_Fall2010.pdf
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
certification required for instructors. In addition to the Arizona outsourcing scandal mentioned previously, there are other instances of low-wage workers in other countries being used to correct homework assignments. With the concern cited regarding student-teacher ratios, policymakers should realize the expectations concerning “the level and extent of teacher involvement in the instructional process.”

- **Audits.** Glass and Welner suggest ongoing, regular audits of online schools. Both Connections Academy and K12 Inc. are for-profit entities that will be using public taxpayer dollars to educate children. The Commission should proceed cautiously and should work to guarantee taxpayer dollars are used to provide the best education possible to Maine’s students, not add to the bottom line of large out-of-state corporations.

**Conclusions**

The Maine Charter School Commission should deny the applications of K12 Inc. and Connections Academy to operate virtual charter schools.

If the Commission decides to entertain the notion of allowing either of these schools to operate, the Commission must consider the unique problems presented by each and create safeguards to prevent against the type of practices seen in other states.

- **Require transparency and regular reporting of student attendance**
- **Develop protocols for the payment of funds from school districts to virtual charters, whereby charters only receive public dollars for the actual days students enroll and receive effective Instruction**
- **Hold cyber charters accountable financially for students who return to a public school and need additional remedial work**

The data are overwhelming. Charter cyber schools are not the promised “panacea” for improving student outcomes as their proponents advocated. In fact, cyber charters are far less effective than community-based, brick-and-mortar schools. They are an inefficient use of taxpayer funding and actually create additional burdens on public schools. Other states have already experimented with this new model and the results are conclusive. Maine can learn from others and put taxpayer funding to more productive student-first uses.


For more information, contact:
Maine Education Association President Lois Kilby-Chesley at 622-4418 ext. 2220
Other Sources:

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“Searching for the Reality of Virtual Schools” Center for Public Education and the National School Boards Association May 2012

“Summary Report of the operations and Activities of Online Programs in Colorado” Carpenter, Kafer, Reese and Shafer; Colorado Department of Education, June 1, 2011

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