A cyber-charter school is a school that delivers academic instruction entirely or predominately via the Internet to students either in their homes or in locations other than a classroom where teachers are present. While cyber-charter schools were not specifically addressed in the original Charter School Law, they have been authorized under subsequent amendments to that law. The commonwealth creates cyber-charter schools by approving their charters, and it oversees both the academic and financial operations of these schools.

**How Cyber-Charter Schools Teach**

The concept of learning through a cyber-charter school seems to be a combination of students teaching themselves by using computer software while getting supervision and assistance from a parent or tutor. The cyber-charter school also may provide some academic support and monitoring. Much of the time, students use mainly self-paced computer programs and online references similar to the use of workbooks in public schools. Some cyber institutions offer live or recorded “Webcasts” of classes taught by an instructor at a remote location. These Internet broadcasts also may include interactive capability, such as telephone conference calling for question-and-answer sessions.

**Paying for Cyber-Charter Schools**

Each school district is required to pay to a cyber-charter school a certain amount per resident who is enrolled in that school. In theory, the amount is equal to what would be the per-pupil funding the school district should receive in state money. In reality, the commonwealth stopped funding public schools on a per-student basis in the early 1990s; therefore, the costs of cyberschools typically are supported with local tax dollars rather than those coming from the state. In addition, the dollar amount paid to charter schools, including cyber-charter schools, in some districts is greater than the actual instructional costs per student in the school district.

Under the current cyber-charter school funding scheme, each school district pays a different amount to charter schools, including cyber-charter schools, based on the budgeted expenditures per student in the school district. Therefore, School District A could pay $8,500 per resident student to attend Cyber-Charter School A, and School District B could pay $6,000 per resident student to attend the same cyberschool. That means that taxpayers in School District A are partially subsidizing the resident students of School District B who attend the same cyber-charter school, without their knowledge.

PSBA supports proposed legislation that would require the state to directly pay for cyber-charter school instruction from the Pennsylvania Department of Education budget, rather than passing it through school district budgets. However, at a minimum, the association believes that standard tuition rates for all students would be helpful in lowering cyber-charter school costs to taxpayers.
Cyber-Charter School Accountability

Academic and financial accountability of cyber-charter schools is a big concern for public schools.

Currently, public schools receive no information regarding the academic achievements or progress of their resident students attending cyber-charter schools. There are no requirements in place that give public schools the ability to ensure that their resident students are reaching the same academic proficiency required of public school students. This is troublesome, as only three of 12 cyber-charter schools met the federal requirements for “adequate yearly progress” for the 2005-06 academic year.

Financially, cyber-charter schools do not face the same money constraints as public schools. School districts in Pennsylvania are limited to holding money in a fund balance that is equal to between 8%-12% of the budget. No such restriction is placed on cyber-charter schools. The Pennsylvania Department of Education reports that five of the 12 cyber-charter schools have unreserved fund balances of more than 30%. This totals in the millions of dollars of taxpayer funds that these institutions are holding, when under state law, public schools would be forced to return some of that money to the taxpayers. PSBA has called for the state legislature to fix this problem by placing cyber-charter schools under the same financial rules as other public schools.

The Future of Online Learning

PSBA supports the concept of distance learning using technology such as the Internet. In fact, several school districts have joined cyberschool consortiums or have begun offering their own cyber-education programs. There are many advantages to combining classroom and cyber learning that school districts are using to educate students.

The development of cyber learning and the use of technology to enhance, enrich and improve educational opportunities is welcomed by public schools. With proper safeguards and accountability standards in place, especially in the education of at-risk students, those children unable to succeed in traditional educational settings may, indeed, thrive.

However, cyber-charter schools and other Internet-based approaches to education must be subject to the same standards of quality and accountability that are demanded of public schools.