

Virtual success or state money pit?

By Sarah Ovaska / N.C. Policy Watch

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Thousands of North Carolina schoolchildren may be taking their classes through home computers next year, after state lawmakers created a pilot program that will add two online-based schools to the state's growing portfolio of charter schools.

The four-year pilot program outlined in this year's state budget requires the State Board of Education to approve two statewide virtual charter schools by next year.

It could send millions in public education dollars from local school districts to private companies expected to provide the at-home curriculum.

Applications were submitted to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction this month by two groups affiliated with the nation's two largest online education companies — K12, Inc. and Connections Academy. The companies would run the schools under a management contract with a non-profit board of directors, while students take classes from their home computers and are supervised by parents or guardians serving as "learning coaches" to ensure that students complete their school work.

The State Board of Education is slated to discuss the applications in December and make their final decisions about approval in January. The schools, if approved, will begin teaching students at the beginning of the school year in August 2015.

The pilot program is separate from the North Carolina Virtual Public School, an online school run by the state that offers individual classes to students around the state.

North Carolina is opening its doors to virtual charter schools as some states that were early adopters of online-based education have questioned the value and quality of education that companies like K12, Inc., offer.

The for-profit company gets most of its revenue from running public charter schools in 30 states across the nation. The company first tried to open up a North Carolina charter school in 2011, but the State Board of Education didn't act on that application, a contentious move that led to litigation.

Connections Academy has also previously applied to open a statewide virtual charter school in North Carolina, but failed to get approval.

K12, Inc., in particular, has faced accusations in other states of heavily marketing its online schools to families that are ill-suited for the online program in order to pull in revenue from public education streams.

"That online space is being defined by these for-profit companies," said Gary Miron, a Western Michigan University professor who has published reports critical of K12, Inc. and virtual charter schools. "They are trying to get any and all students in the door."

Tennessee, which opened its K12, Inc.-run charter school in 2011, may shut down the virtual school at the end of the year, after three years of test scores that placed the school among the worst-performing in the state. In Pennsylvania, the Agora

Cyber Charter School, one of the biggest pieces of K12, Inc.'s revenue stream, ended its management contract in September with K12, Inc., though the school plans to keep using K12-provided curriculum.

In April, the NCAA said it won't accept coursework from more than two dozen K12, Inc.-run schools for student athletes seeking eligibility to play at Division I or Division II colleges or universities.

If approved, the N.C. Virtual Academy (which will be run by K12, Inc.) and N.C. Connections Academy (to be run by Connections Academy) each hope to enroll 1,500 students in the first year, for a total of 3,000 students. At funding levels of approximately \$9,000 per student, that could send up to \$26 million in state, federal and local public education dollars to the two charter schools in the first year of operation, according to budget figures included in the schools' applications.

The pilot program also requires that 90 percent of the schools teachers reside in North Carolina and the schools must have at least one teacher for every 50 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. High school must have one teacher for every 150 students.

Yevonne Brannon, the chair of the public school advocacy group Public Schools First N.C., said she's concerned the virtual charter schools, which have seen poor performances in others states, will drain more money from the already-lean budgets of the state's public schools.

"We know what type of track record these schools have," Brannon said. "Why are we now throwing this all to the wind?"

Bryan Setser, the founding board chair and president of North Carolina Connections Academy, told the Asheville Citizen-Times in August that the pilot program will mean more opportunities for North Carolina students.

"It's just a way to do school differently, and if it works and we are competitive and above state averages, then we've succeeded," Setser told the Asheville newspaper. "And if we do it for two or three years, and we're not meeting the needs of students, then we'll certainly re-evaluate that."

Sarah Ovaska wrote this for the progressive N.C. Policy Watch. Contact her by calling 919-861-1463 or by email at sarah@ncpolicywatch.com.

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