

## 15 Months in Virtual Charter Hell: A Teacher's Tale

By [Anthony Cody](#) on January 6, 2014 6:12 AM

### Guest post by Darcy Bedortha.

In late August, 2012, I took a job in a school that is part of the largest virtual charter school chain in the nation. While I had misgivings about the nature of the school, I thought perhaps if I were diligent, I could serve my students well. In November 2013 I decided I could no longer continue as a teacher. This is my story.

### Some Background on K12 Inc.

K12 Inc., the virtual-education company, was founded in 1999 by the one-time "junk bond king" Michael Milken and the hedge fund banker Ronald Packard. The company's original board chairman was William J. Bennett, who had been the U.S. Secretary of Education under President Ronald Reagan. (Bennett resigned from his position with K12 Inc. in 2005 after sparking controversy by stating that the U.S. crime rate would go down if more African-American babies were aborted.)

As a private company founded by financiers, K12 Inc. is highly profit-driven. Though its stock price has apparently **taken a hit recently**, there is little doubt that K12 Inc. has been quite successful in bringing in revenue--even as regular public schools have faced dire financial straits. According to the Center for Media and Democracy's PR Watch, **Packard, who is the current CEO, earned \$19 million** in compensation from 2009-2013. **In 2013 alone, as Chicago closed 50 of its public schools and Philadelphia closed 23 more, K12 Inc. brought in a whopping \$730.8 million in taxpayer dollars** from its managed public schools, and its top executives saw their **compensation skyrocket by 96 percent**.

### My Life as a Virtual Teacher

I became a teacher because I am an advocate for youth and social justice. However, this purpose was hard to fulfill working in a K12 Inc. school. With the kind of technology, systems and process management needed to keep the enrollment machine running (and the machine is priority), there is never much time to actually teach. In my former school, each class met for 30 minutes in an interactive-blackboard setting one day each week. Fewer than 10 percent of students actually attended these "classes." Other than that time and any one-on-one sessions a teacher and student might set up (which, in my experience, almost never happened), there is no room for direct instruction.

Given the extensive needs of the students, this set up does not serve them well. Most of my contact with students was by email, through which I answered questions about everything from login issues and technology glitches to clarifying of assignments, and even that communication was only accessed by a very small percentage of students.

In addition, because students continuously enroll, no one was on the same assignment at the same time. I taught high school English. In a given day in mid-November I would grade introductory assignments, diagnostic essays and end-of-semester projects, and everything in between, for each course (this month I had 30 separate courses). I found it to be impossible to meet the learning needs of my students in that situation.

For most of last year I was Lead Teacher at the school, which required me to attend national staff meetings each week. At first the marketing focus of the conversations turned my stomach, and then it made me furious. In my experience, the conversation was never about how our students were struggling, how we could support those who were trying to learn the English Language, how we could support those who were homeless or how we could support those with special needs. It was never about how we could support our teachers. It seemed to me like the focus was often about enrollment, about data, about numbers of students who had not taken the proper number of tests, about ranking schools and ranking teachers. And there was marketing: how to get more children enrolled, how to reach more families, how to be sure they were pre-registered for next year, how to get Facebook pages and other marketing information "pushed out" to students.

The state-level staff meetings were not much better. Teachers were occasionally bullied and disrespected by the head administrator. Threatening teachers who had been unsuccessful at reaching students, he once yelled "I own your phone and I can see if you're making calls!" (K12 Inc. does own the phones its teachers use, as well as the laptops and office equipment for teachers and students). During one meeting, in effort to force students to take yet another standardized test, it was suggested that we lock students out of their classes until they completed the tests. I urged them not to lock the curriculum. I had spent days each week trying to keep my seniors engaged and working in their classes, they were hanging on by their fingertips, and I knew that if pushed, they would simply give up.

Teachers who work for K12 Inc. are not well compensated for all their scrambling. At my former school, teachers are paid based on the number of students on their rosters. With 225 students they are still part-time (at .75 FTE), for which the pay is \$31,500 a year. With 226 students they become full time employees, and will then be paid \$42,000. Some full-time teachers now carry loads of well over 300

students. Even considering other expenses (but noting that these schools have no building or transportation costs), it is clear to me that K12 is generating considerable profits from the student/teacher ratio and compensation scheme.

My first month of teaching exhausted me, and there was never a moment in 15 months to catch my breath (many of us taught summer school, with no extra compensation, per employment agreement). Teachers are responsible for setting up courses, due dates, course pathways, etc. in connection to an extensive and ever-changing digital curriculum which is fraught with technical glitches and system-level errors. Teachers are also required to be available to students during the day, late into the evening and on weekends. In addition, they must contribute to "special projects".

Courses and students are added daily, so there is continuous juggling, all happening during the first month of school (and beyond) while students (and teachers) are trying to learn how the system works. Granted, the first months of school are difficult for any school, but teachers at my school were putting in 40, 50, and 60 hour weeks in September 2012 while being paid only for the students on their roster, which for me hovered around 100 by the end of the first month. I think my first two-week paycheck, given the 75 students on my roster in the beginning, was about \$300. Students are enrolled and drop out daily throughout the year (enrollment pauses only in December and May-June) so numbers change constantly and part-time teachers are never sure of their income.

### **Serving Disadvantaged Students Poorly**

I believe K12 Inc. targets poor communities and economically struggling regions; they are easily influenced because they are desperately seeking alternatives to devastatingly under-funded schools. These financially strapped schools are being further bled by the exodus of students who are lured by what I now see are empty promises of marketing experts at K12 Inc. It is a vicious cycle in which, as far as I can see, no one but the corporate profiteers are winning, and that is no wonder to me: K12 Inc. has [worked closely with the American Legislative Exchange Council](#), which has lobbied extensively for draft [legislation to expand virtual education in 39 states or territories](#), potentially further crippling the financial status of public schools whose funds they siphon.

Luis Huerta of NEPC and Teachers College, Columbia University [cites K12 Inc.'s explicit strategy](#) of targeting the least-supported population of students. He states that the corporation has an established practice of going after students who are "at risk" because of their tendency to not engage in school or expect much, if anything, from their educational experience, thereby creating a greater profit margin for K12 Inc. If a student is not active in school or demanding a quality education, he or she does not take as much of a teacher's time; fewer questions are asked, less work needs reviewing and less interaction is required. By targeting these students for enrollment, K12 Inc. is able to push a higher student to teacher ratio: fewer teachers equals less expense, more students equals more income, fewer expenses in conjunction with greater income equals greater profits. This is a core issue with for-profit education management organizations.

The majority of students at the school are the kinds of kids whose histories and current realities cause concerned adults to keep eyes open for signs of trauma, those that haunt the dreams of educators and social workers. My students were survivors - of suicide attempts, of bullying, of abuse, of neglect, of the attempted suicides of siblings or best-friends or boyfriends. Some of them battle addictions and destructive habits; some self-harm, isolate themselves, or even run away.

**I was an English teacher, so my students would write.** They wrote of pain and fear and of not fitting in. They were the kinds of young people who desperately needed to have the protective circle of a community watching over them. They needed one healthy person to smile at them and recognize them by name every day, to say "I'm glad you're here!" Many of my former students do not have that.

The last thing these young people needed, I came to realize during my time with K12 Inc., was to be isolated in front of a computer screen. A week or two or three would often go by without my getting a word from a student. They didn't answer their email, they didn't answer their phones. Often their phones were disconnected. Their families were disconnected. My students also moved a lot. During my first year at the school I spent days on the phone trying to track students down. This year I struggled to not simply give up under the weight of it all.

In the fall of 2013, 42 percent of our high school students were deemed "economically disadvantaged." I had a number of students who were not native English speakers. I cannot wrap my head around how to serve a student who is unable to read or comprehend the language that the virtual curriculum is written in, let alone learn the technology (when it is functioning) without sitting beside them in the same space. Many of my non-native speakers had parents who did not speak English at all. These students often struggled for a very short time, and then I never saw their work again. They dropped out, moved on.

The majority of the students at the school were lacking credits needed for graduation. Most of them could not afford another failure, not in terms of credits and not in terms of emotional well-being, yet, as I wrote this in early December, nearly 80 percent of our students were failing their classes. At that time there were 303 students (12 percent of the school) enrolled in special education programs - and 259 of them were failing while 17 had no grade at all. Eighty-two percent of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders were failing. This kind of failure is in no way limited to this school; it is system-wide, reigning throughout the virtual-school world, explicitly true for K12, Inc. and its national network of online schools.

According to a [July 2012 report](#) published by the NEPC, a nonprofit research organization that is skeptical of privatization initiatives in public education, only 27.7 percent of K12, Inc. schools met the Annual Yearly Progress goals, as compared to 52 percent of brick and mortar public schools (Miron & Urschel, 2012). Similarly, the same study calls attention to the fact that only 37.6 percent of students at full-time virtual schools graduate on time, as compared to the national average of 79.4 percent for all public high school students. A substantial number of my students transferred in from other virtual schools, such as Connections Academy. These students were markedly transient, and did not find success with K12 Inc. either.

In addition, CEO Ronald Packard was named in a [2012 class action complaint](#) citing his alleged false statements regarding student performance and K12, Inc.'s "aggressive tactics" to recruit and enroll students in effort to cover up the 40-60 percent turnover rate (the parties reached a tentative \$6.75 million settlement agreement in March 2013).

I can't say I'm surprised by any of this. Earlier last fall, due to the sudden need for a colleague to take leave I was handed his student load on top of my own. For a month I had 476 students on my rosters, in 30 different classes. In my classes, my students were writing narratives, argumentative and research papers and poetry - all of which I was committed to reading. I had students who struggled to find their way through the course pages to the assignment they wish to work on, and in their frustration they often emailed for direction. I had students who were struggling to find their way through life. I began to write my story during the third week of November and at that point, I still had students beginning their first day, with the expectation to finish a semester's work by January 24th.

Each of these situations and many others required individual attention. How does anyone offer anything close to personal attention for over three-hundred students, most of whom you never see? Practices such as excusing (eliminating) assignments were the norm at the school. K12 Inc. calls it a "proficiency model" but it amounts to an easy route to course completion. Even the students who were more or less on pace were not learning deeply; they were often merely filling out digital worksheets as quickly as they could. The most motivated of my students regularly finished more than a dozen assignments in a day. What kind of depth of learning could that offer? That kind of workload for K12 teachers created fertile ground for practices like minimizing curriculum or [sending essays to India to be graded](#).

Last year I had a student who never showed up to class, never turned work in, skimmed by on gaming the system with a phone call every few weeks, just enough to keep from being dropped from the rosters. She called me three days after my final grades were submitted in June, desperate to find a way to graduate. I apologized, said my grades had been submitted, and offered information for the summer school we were holding. A week or so later, when I arrived for graduation an administrator pulled me aside to tell me that this student had passed "by the proficiency method" and would be graduating. Our graduation rate was so low that this was not a surprise to me, not after the year I had spent working in this system. I was learning how things worked. Similar things have happened elsewhere. In Tennessee [an email was discovered](#) at a K12, Inc. school directing teachers to delete poor grades.

The [July 2012 NEPC report](#) concludes that virtual schools are not adequately meeting the educational needs of students. "Children who enroll in a K12 Inc. cyberschool, who receive full-time instruction in front of a computer instead of in a classroom with a live teacher and other students, are more likely to fall behind in reading and math," the authors state "These children are also more likely to move between schools or leave school altogether - and the cyberschool is less likely to meet federal education standards."

I became a teacher because I am an advocate for youth. My wish is to empower them to find their voices, to use them respectfully and effectively to work for justice in this world. I only scratched the surface of building relationships with my students last year. This year it was even more difficult.

As I reflect, I realize that the inability to dig into their realities and connect provided me a level of protection.

**As I begin telling my story to a national audience, I face considerable dilemmas.** How do I call out the corporations for the wrongful actions they are taking, for the massive deception being perpetrated and the money being siphoned from public schools without real people who are trying to do good work being hit by the fallout? How do I highlight the research that makes clear the failure of virtual schools without throwing talented teachers who are doing their best under the bus? Teachers I worked with are afraid to speak out, they are afraid to challenge or even question the administration or the system. I see the same fear dominant in the narrative across the country, in all walks of education. It is a justifiable fear; work is hard to come by, in part because of the very online programs I am rallying against. It is not hard to see that as I speak out, I might lose friends and I will jeopardize my own potential to be hired elsewhere as a public school teacher. It is a lonely place to stand, and a difficult decision to make.

I struggled with the decision to leave my students, and if I had better identified their individual challenges and truly gotten to know them it would have been doubly difficult. I continue to remind myself that I left to save my own health, that if my health had failed I would not be able to continue to advocate for youth. I would not be here for my own sons and I would not be able to hold my grandchild. The internal agony of compromised values and the endless dance of ethical dilemmas spinning through my sleepless nights finally got the better of me, and in facing

a choice between financial crisis and health crisis, I gave my notice. I am unleashed, I am educated and I am fighting for the students I left behind. As an advocate I have chosen to walk my talk. I will speak for my students until they can fill my shoes, and I have faith that they will.

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**What do you think of Darcy Bedortha's story? What should be done about virtual schools that operate in this fashion?**

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