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**Cyber Charters in the Volunteer State:  
Education Options for Tennessee's Forgotten**

by Shaka Mitchell

In October, the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress released "the Nation's Report Card," a study of nationwide exams administered to fourth and eighth-graders in math and reading. The report indicated Tennessee's children are in the bottom third in the nation in both reading and math. This unfortunate news supports the results of the annual state-mandated reading and math exams required under the federal No Child Left Behind law, which showed Tennessee's children scoring significantly below the national average at all grade levels.

The poor performance of Tennessee's students does not bode well in a shrinking world where the best jobs will go to the brightest candidates, regardless of geography. This means that a kid in Cookeville will be competing with one in China for the same job. The solution to this problem isn't closing the borders or stopping international trade, it's taking care of our own by providing every opportunity possible for a high quality education.

To say that school choice has been given short shrift in Tennessee is generous. The Governor has spent so much time thinking up creative ways to spend tax dollars, like state-funded pre-K, that statistically valid ideas to benefit Tennessee's at-risk and disadvantaged children, like state-funded K-12 scholarships, have gone by the wayside. Very compelling arguments by noted economists like Milton Friedman have also fallen on deaf ears in Nashville. Likewise, the state's charter school law is considered one of the least adequate in the country. The Center for Education Reform rates it in the bottom 10 of all state charter school laws nationally.

One reason alternatives to the conventional public school system have experienced little traction is that charter schools, vouchers and magnet schools are largely considered options for improving *urban* schools. Everyone feels good about providing education options for minority kids in Memphis, but this attitude leaves out a large percentage of the population. More than a quarter of the state's population is considered *rural* according to the U.S. Census Bureau. People forget that in Tennessee poverty disproportionately affects people outside of the city. Higher education is also dispersed unevenly. A full 23% of people in urban areas are college graduates compared to only 11% of those living in rural areas. So what are we to do about schoolchildren that live outside major cities? How do we ensure that they receive the highest quality education possible?

One especially viable option that is gaining steam across the United States is the creation of cyber charter schools. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that on an average day 77 million adults go online to do everything from sending email to donating to charities. Young people utilize the Internet and computers in the highest numbers. It, therefore, makes perfect sense that today's student would feel comfortable waking up and logging onto her computer to receive lessons from a teacher.

This is the idea behind a powerful new learning tool called cyber charter schools. This year over 31,000 students across the country are being taught through 81 innovative cyber charter schools. These schools, now in 16 states, are helping change the way Americans think of traditional school districts by pairing the usefulness of the Internet with the advantages of charter schools. All signs point to exponential growth for cyber charter schools as teachers, students and parents continue to prove that the Internet can and should be used for more than shopping and email. Unfortunately, this important education reform has yet to take place in Tennessee.

The lack of cyber charter schools in Tennessee is primarily a result of the poor judgment of the Tennessee General Assembly when adopting the "Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002." The Act—Tennessee's foundational charter school directive—expressly prohibits the authorization of public or private cyber-based charter schools. This unfortunate policy comes at a time in which cyber charter schools are in their infancy and the long-term capabilities and benefits of cyber charters to children in Tennessee are only now being realized.

### **What is a Cyber Charter Education?**

Cyber charter schools are publicly funded schools that are open to any student. The schools cannot discriminate and teachers must follow the same certification standards as those in brick-and-mortar schools. Cyber charters typically provide a computer and modem for each student, greatly reducing potential costs to families.

The idea that students would receive lessons via computer is neither new nor unique to cyber charter schools. In fact, more than 50% of U.S. high schools—public, charter or otherwise—currently offer, or plan to offer, online courses. Cyber charter school students, however, almost never come to a traditional schoolhouse. Like other charter schools, cyber charter schools are public schools sponsored by local, state or independent authorizers. A cyber charter's success—like the success of any charter school—is dependent on its meeting specific goals in its charter, and on effectively managing its financial and operational responsibilities.

The main difference between cyber charter schools and brick and mortar charter schools is the delivery system. A schoolhouse is obviously limited in the number of students that can attend. Students typically come from the surrounding neighborhoods or districts. Most cyber charter schools can be accessed any time, from any place in the world. Gone

are the days when learning stops once the final bell rings. Cyber charter schoolteachers are more akin to an emergency room doctor because they are always “on call,” willing to assist students.

Through cyber charter schools, students have the opportunity to take classes that could never be offered in their conventional school districts. Inaccessibility is particularly a problem in rural schools. Rural schools often find difficulty attracting new teachers and therefore students miss out on new learning opportunities.

Take the case of Rhea County. Because there are only six schools in the whole county, many people send their children to private schools in the closest major city, Chattanooga. It is outrageous that people have to drive 40 miles one-way to find a high school that offers a full range of classes. In Rhea, there is only one high school. If, in a given year, there is little interest in taking Physics for college credit, then the course will probably not be offered. Cyber charter schools would allow the Physics-minded student to take the course and have the chance to gain college credit even if no other student in his school wants to take the class. As it stands, there is no such option. Students of every achievement level should be able to have their academic needs met without leaving their town.

One of the most important qualities about cyber charter schools is that they, and indeed all other charter schools, are accountable to parents and students. Unlike many traditional public schools, millions of Americans now know that charter schools must “put up or shut-up.” If a charter school fails to show success, that school will be closed. Cyber charter schools are no different and the figures indicate that, by and large, this accountability is working. As a result, very few charter schools have been closed due to academic failure.

Cyber charter schools have additional benefits. For example, students who for medical, professional, disciplinary or other reasons cannot attend a brick-and-mortar school, now have better access to a quality education. Additionally, cyber charters offer high-tech opportunities to students who may not otherwise have the chance to work with technology—an advantage that often pays high dividends as the student begins college or a career.

Perhaps most importantly, cyber charters offer personalized curriculum for students of all abilities. From the student whose education has advanced beyond the classes offered at his school to the child who remains unsuccessful in traditional classroom settings, cyber charters allow parents, teachers and students to work together to develop a specialized curriculum that meets the needs of individual students and encourages their success.

This type of learning might not be best for every student, but lawmakers should allow parents the opportunity to make this decision for their children instead of automatically directing them to the nearest conventional public school.

## **What Should a Cyber Charter Law Look Like?**

Allowing Tennessee's students the opportunity to benefit from the advantages of charter schools is as simple as amending two sentences in the "Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002." A good cyber charter school law, however, must prevent school system abuse of the possible financial benefits of cyber charters, while respecting and protecting the right to homeschool in Tennessee.

Adequate per pupil funding of cyber charter schools is necessary because, on average, the cost of providing a quality education via web-based curriculum is consistent with a traditional brick and mortar school. Still, in those instances in which the cost of a particular cyber charter school is less than the typical per-pupil expenditure for a Local Education Authority (LEA), every effort must be made to prevent the LEA from pushing students toward cyber charter schools for financial gain. If, for example, the cost of educating a child in a particular area is \$7,000, but a quality cyber school can teach the child for \$4,000, there is an economic incentive for the LEA to encourage as many children as possible to utilize cyber charter schools rather than brick and mortar schools. In doing so, the LEA would essentially turn a \$3,000 "profit" of sorts each time the child leaves traditional schooling for a cyber charter school. In order to prevent this troubling incentive, any law permitting cyber charter schools in Tennessee must require districts to track all money saved on cyber charter students and place those funds in an account to offset any planned budgetary increases in the future, thus saving tax dollars.

While cyber charter schools may, in some cases, be a useful tool for students interested in tackling classes that parents or other at-home educators are unprepared to teach, it is important to realize that cyber charter schools are different from homeschools and should not be seen as a tool to replace homeschooling. Upon the authorization of cyber charter schools, cyber charter laws should ensure that homeschooled students remain exempt from the mandatory state testing that would be required of a public cyber charter student. Additionally, the state government must prohibit local government use of cyber charters to pilfer Tennessee's homeschool population in an attempt to generate state and local education funding or impose state regulations on homeschoolers.

## **Conclusion**

For more than a century, technological advancements have improved educational quality by providing teachers the opportunity to educate in ways that are more beneficial to students in America's schools. Imagine if Tennessee's state legislators of yesteryear had banned overhead projectors in schools; prohibited educational filmstrips, movies and audio recordings in the classroom; or outlawed computers to supplement traditional holdings in school libraries. Unfortunately, Tennessee's legislators of today may have made a mistake of an even greater magnitude by forbidding cyber charter schools and precluding the use of a technological tool that can advance learning in our state.

By the year's end, nearly 100,000 students will learn through cyber charter schools across the country. Couple this with increased Internet use and steady charter school growth in general, and thousands more are likely to turn to new cyber charter schools for innovative approaches to quality education. Leaders in Nashville should be quick to realize the benefits of virtual learning and offer all students across the state the opportunity to receive a quality education.

In a state that should leave no stone unturned in its efforts to improve the poor educational outcomes by its students, Tennessee law should specifically provide for cyber charter schools—not prohibit them.

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#### *About the Author*

*Shaka L. A. Mitchell, J.D., is a scholar at the Tennessee Center for Policy Research and Associate Director of Policy and Planning at the Center for Education Reform.*

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