Comparison of Public Cyber Charter Schools and Cyber Programs

Cyber charter schools are full-fledged public schools while cyber programs, offered by Intermediate Units (IUs), are supplemental educational programs. A program is not a school and there are significant legal and financial differences. The costs of IU programs address instructional needs, but the costs associated with administration and compliance are borne by the district, and not reflected in the IU costs. Here are samples of those costs.

Legal Structure
Public cyber charter schools and school districts are classified as Local Education Agencies (LEAs) with the same accompanying responsibilities, reporting requirements, and necessary overhead. IU programs have the same responsibilities as a math, science, or art class within a district

Special Education Services
As with districts, cyber charter schools must supply complete Special Education services while IU programs provide only those specific accommodations articulated in the student's IEP.

Federal and State Mandated Programs
Cyber charter schools must assure compliance with every federal and state mandate as a district. IUs do not.

Student Technology
Cyber school students are supplied with a package that includes a computer, printer, supplemental equipment, internet access, and tech support at an average cost of $2,000 per student. Furthermore, equipment must be shipped and serviced throughout the entire state. IUs cyber programs use existing district or students' personal computers.

Technology Infrastructure
The technology infrastructure to support a statewide cyber network dwarfs that necessary for a cyber program. Cyber charter schools also provide extensive 24/7 support systems to respond to students' educational and technology needs which IU programs do not.

Pennsylvania Information Management System (PIMS)
Districts and cyber schools must commit significant time and resources to administration and maintenance of the Department of Education PIMS system. IUs do not.

Counseling and Guidance

Cyber charter schools are legally required to provide comprehensive counseling and guidance services to students wherever they are located in the state. The cyber schools maintain or rent facilities throughout the state for this purpose but IU programs have no responsibility or expense for counseling or guidance.

State Mandated Testing

As with districts, cyber charter schools must administer all mandated state testing. Unlike districts, cyber schools must rent facilities and pay for teachers to travel and monitor the testing throughout the entire state. Districts use existing school facilities within their limited geographic area. IUs have no responsibility or expense for mandated state testing.

Student Health

Cyber charter schools must comply with all state-mandated regulations, including employing one certified school nurse for every 1,500 students. IUs have no responsibility or expense for student health.

Financial Accountability

Annual audits are required of all cyber charter schools. No audits are required of an IU program.

Performance Accountability

Cyber charter schools receive student performance scores on PSSA, PVAAS, and SPP. None of those scores are reported for students in IU programs independent of district schools.

Transcripts and Mandates

Cyber charter schools must maintain student transcripts and compliance records for all federal and state mandates. IU cyber programs do not.

Graduation Requirements

Cyber charter schools are responsible to ensure students meet all state requirements for progression through the grades and graduation. IUs have no responsibility for meeting grade progression or graduation requirements.

There are costs associated with all of these differences that are ignored in the Governor's Budget proposal.