

A brief history of PA Cyber Charter School

Curiously, it was the closing of a steel mill that led to the founding of PA Cyber Charter School, the largest and most successful K-12 school in the Pennsylvania and a national educational model.

Midland, Pa., is a tiny rustbelt steel town in Western Pennsylvania, five miles from the Ohio state line. Declining enrollment after the 1982 shutdown of Crucible Steel, the town's major employer, had forced Midland Borough School District to close its high school in 1985 and tuition its 150 high school students to neighboring districts. After a failed attempt to merge with another district, by 1993 Midland's only real option was to cross state lines to tuition these students to East Liverpool, Ohio.

In September 1997, taking advantage of newly passed Pa. Act 22 creating charter schools, Dr. Nick Trombetta, then superintendent of Midland Schools, formed a planning committee for the organization of a cyber charter school. The goal simply was to give Midland students another educational option. As it turned out, Dr. Trombetta's idea – which this former wrestling coach pursued with his customary zeal, organization and motivational skills - gave every student in Pennsylvania another educational option: a free education from an online K-12 public school.

Act 22 didn't specifically provide for online-only charter schools, but it left the door open: "Nothing in this cause shall preclude the use of computer and satellite linkages for delivering instruction to students." Act 88 later codified the rights, responsibilities and role of cyber schools in Pennsylvania.

The Midland School Board chartered the new cyber school. Starting with a \$25,000 planning grant and volunteer workers, Western Pennsylvania Cyber Charter (the "Western" later was dropped) opened in 2000 in borrowed rooms at Midland's elementary school with a full-time staff of seven and two telephones. It was the state's second cyber school but first K-12 cyber.

Statewide response exceeded all expectations. Dr. Trombetta hoped they'd get 50 students that first year; they got 527 and graduated 17. The next year enrollment climbed to 1,150, then 1,350, then 2,000, 3,100, 4,400, 6,000, 7,400, and, in 2008-09, 8,100, with students from 478 of the state's 501 school districts and a graduating class of 700.

In a recent message to PA Cyber's 500 teachers, administrators and support staff, Dr. Trombetta praised them for their innovation and service: "We are the change agents, the trailblazers. . . While the rest of the world watches exclaiming 'How do they do that?' or 'They can't do that!', we get it done. We will continue to serve as advocates for our students and their families across Pennsylvania for many years to come."