Cyber school offers alternative education to local youth

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This is the second in a series of stories on the effects of cyber charter schools on local school districts and students.

On any given school day, Tom Schellhammer and his younger brother Aaron are typically found at their computers working on assigned studies in curriculum that includes math, science, language arts and social studies.

How the two Bradford brothers differ from the majority of other youngsters in the area is that they are cyber charter school students who do all of their studies online. As the boys live in the Bradford Area School District, fees for their cyber charter schooling are paid by their home school district.

For youngsters such as the Schellhammer brothers, along with more than 50 other cyber charter students in their school district, the option to study at home is assuring they receive a quality education, said their father, Karl Schellhammer.

He said his son Tom, 19, expects to graduate from cyber charter studies provided through the school district sometime in the next several months. Tom had attended Bradford Area High School, but would have been a fifth-year graduate if he had continued to take needed courses at the campus this year.

“I’ve been doing this for three or four weeks,” Tom said of his online studies through the school district. He said the program is preferable to him as it allows him to do his studies at his own pace.

“This is good for someone who doesn’t want a set schedule and go to school at exactly 8 a.m. every morning,” Tom said. “And, maybe this is preferable for someone who doesn’t want to be around certain people or have social contact that much.”

He said that following graduation he plans to attend a trade school or possibly join the military.

His brother Aaron, 12, has a different reason for attending the Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School, based in the Philadelphia area. He attended schools in the district until sixth grade, but opted to go to cyber charter school because of bullying issues.

Karl Schellhammer also believes his son didn’t attain the appropriate level of education for his age while attending schools in the district.

He said Aaron was enrolled in Pennsylvania Leadership in the fall, and since then has taken courses in language arts, math and social studies as well as health and music, and art and technology.

“I’ve been at my mom’s and she makes sure I get up everyday and do this,” Aaron said of his online...
studies.

His father noted that when Aaron visits his home, he also does school work there as the studies can be done at any computer.

“I keep an eye on him to make sure he does his work,” Karl Schellhammer said. “Most of the kids his age (early adolescence) have to be watched; you have to check over their work.”

He said the cyber charter staff also monitor Aaron’s work and notify him or the boy’s mother if his grades aren’t at a proper level. The father can also communicate with the instructors, question them on certain educational issues and get timely responses.

“To a certain extent, this is focused, a lot more than it is in school,” Karl Schellhammer claimed.

The Era also spoke to Kim Austin, who not only works for the Agora cyber charter school, but has a daughter, Adrianna, 17, who graduated from the same program last June with 1,100 other students. The graduation was held at the Hershey Giant Center in Hershey.

“I am a family coach and a point of contact for the school in this area; we have 85 local students” in the region and 12,000 throughout the state, Austin said. “This is a new trend, I know that there are maybe 150,000 students who attend cyber charter schools in the state.”

She said she believes children should be able to attend cyber charter schools as it is a public school of choice.

“And you can imagine there are a million reasons to leave your local (school building),” she said. “There are medical issues, but most students are afraid of bullying; and there are anxiety issues because they’ve been physically assaulted on school grounds.” She said there are also students whose parents don’t get along with teachers.

“Generally, students who don’t do well at the cyber charter, weren’t doing well at the (school building) setting either,” she said in response to school district claims that cyber students often do poorly in the programs.

Austin said she enrolled her daughter in Agora because she believed her child would excel and learn more in the cyber charter program. Her daughter, who focused on art in school, held a public art exhibit with another Agora student last year. The two girls sold a dozen paintings at the show, Austin said. She said her daughter expects to pursue art in college or as career.

Austin said her work obligations with Agora include providing training for parents to ensure their students are on track with their studies.

“The parents are obligated to be a learning coach in order for (their children) to be enrolled in Agora,” Austin explained. “Everybody signs the papers and (should) follow through; the ones that do are very successful.
“Our valedictorian last year went to West Point ... they are fully prepared to go to college when they graduate,” she said.

In addition, students who want to pursue jobs in career-technical areas have attended training in programs such as nursing while still in the Agora program. Although cyber charters don’t offer sports or after-school activities, students are permitted by law to attend those functions in their home school districts, she noted.

Austin said she also ensures that Agora students gets together socially and arranges their field trips. Activities for the students have included picnics at Kinzua Bridge and visits to Waldameer Park in Erie. The students are even planning to hold a prom May 24 at the Salvation Army gymnasium in Bradford.

“For students who love to learn, I just think it’s a brilliant opportunity,” Austin said.