Virtual charter schools seen as real solution for certain Maine students

Two Maine moms believe online teaching is the answer for their fast learners and kids with health or social challenges.

By Susan McMillan
Kennebec Journal

WEST GARDINER — Promotional materials for Maine’s first virtual charter school could do worse than to feature Karinna Dawbin’s children.

If Maine Connections Academy opens this fall, a lot of its students will probably resemble Dawbin’s three children in one way or another, so well do they epitomize the description given by virtual school advocates of students who benefit from that model.

Students in virtual schools learn mostly at home, receiving instruction and interacting with teachers online. Supporters say they work for students who have been bullied, have health problems, need an alternative schedule or want to move at a faster pace than a typical school can accommodate.

Virtual charter schools are also subject to plenty of criticism. Most are operated by for-profit companies, with public education dollars feeding the companies’ bottom lines. Many of the virtual schools in other states have poor records of student achievement.

The list of students who may benefit from virtual schooling echo Dawbin’s reasons for pulling two of her children out of the local public schools and wanting to enroll all of them in Maine Connections Academy.

Dawbin’s 9-year-old son, Peter, isn’t eligible to enroll in the school because the Maine Charter School Commission approved it only for grades 7-12. But Dawbin is hopeful that when he’s old enough, he won’t have the problems in a virtual school that led his mother to decide in January to homeschool him.

Dawbin said Peter often finished assignments well before his classmates, but sometimes teachers didn’t get around to returning them for a long time because of everything else they had on their plates. He became bored and distracted, and his grades started to slip.

Dawbin’s 13-year-old daughter, Kyara, was homeschooled until fourth grade because of chronic asthma that triggered monthslong illnesses every time she got a cold. Now in eighth
grade, Kyrara is being homeschooled again. With Kyrara preparing to enter high school, Dawbin hopes Maine Connections Academy can give her access to Advanced Placement and honors classes not on offer at typical brick-and-mortar high schools.

"I like the classes that are available," she said. "I have aspirations that my children will go to college, so I want them to have a well-rounded education."

Dawbin said all of her children have experienced bullying. She sees virtual school as a way to balance the safe environment of home with social interaction available through the clubs and field trips Maine Connections Academy plans to organize.

Another mother interested in virtual school, Caroline Lauzon, of Waterville, first heard about the concept from a friend in California with two children in a school run by Connections Education, the Maryland-based company that will run Maine Connections Academy.

Lauzon pulled her 14-year-old son, James, out of the local public school this year because there were too many distractions and too much drama, she said. She has an education background and thinks she can keep him on task, and she’s excited that he’ll have access to foreign language classes and advanced mathematics.

Lauzon said she was not aware of the criticisms of virtual charter schools. She thinks they have the potential to be a solution for students who struggle in traditional schools, like her eldest son, whose Asperger’s syndrome made finishing high school a struggle.

Dawbin said she believes that when virtual schools seem to be underperforming, it’s because students’ “learning coaches” – usually parents, who are supposed to supervise the students – are not sufficiently involved.

The Charter School Commission approved Maine Connections Academy on March 3 under the shadow of a bill in the Legislature to place a moratorium. Three days later, however, Gov. LePage vetoed the bill.

The margin of passage in the House for L.D. 1736 would not be enough to override the veto, and Dawbin hopes it will hold.

“If the moratorium goes through, I feel it puts Maine further behind the rest of the country,” she said.

Susan McMillan can be contacted at 621-5645 or at:

smcmillan@centralmaine.com

Twitter: @s_e_mcmillan

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David Bartholomew · Top Commenter · West Virginia Wesleyan College
I guess what I resent the most is a for profit virtual school run by a business and paid for by tax payers. Statistic show that most attempts to create a successful business- any business in fact- do not survive. Virtual charter schools apparently are no exception. I find it strange that some give so little credit to public schools for their successes meanwhile if students fail it has to be the fault of the public school system with no other factors in student failure considered. And that is wrong. The bottom line is that I want the taxes I pay to go to public schools for reasons which should by now be abundantly obvious. Now is not the time to siphon funds from public education in a down economy. While the economy has improved we are not out of the woods yet. If parents want an alternative education for their kids then then let them pay for it.

Frank J. Heller · Top Commenter · Liberty High School
But I bet you never complained when we put APPLE into the school laptop computer business with endless national endorsements; or buying tons of text books from 'for profit' textbook publishers....How many non-profits make athletic equipment? Give it up, your opposition to 'for-profit's' is antiquated Communist dogma that bears no relationship to a modern economy and educational innovation. Adopting it would make Maine an even more isolated island of ignorance.

David Bartholomew · Top Commenter · West Virginia Wesleyan College
Frank J. Heller-Oh no! Not another right wing nut who sees "commies" crawling out of the wood work everywhere. "Maine an even more isolated island of ignorance" You incredible snob-Frank. You need to quit saying insulting-feel good- outrageous things just for "effect" better yet why don't you just get the hell out of Maine.

Frank J. Heller · Top Commenter · Liberty High School
David Bartholomew >>>>>>it's still communist dogma about the evils of capitalism....Karl Marx's pic still on your wall. Maine is so far behind the mainstream of educational technology, and where the rest of the world is going......so you went to W. Va. Wesleyan College...what's a matter, U MS not good enough for you or are just another higher ed. snob? You don't want to answer the question about APPLE's for profit mentality and how Dem's made money by promoting it's laptops to the world? No amount of name calling can hide this fact of corporate involvement in Maine education or maybe you were too young to learn about Apple's Classroom of the future(1992) or have you been brainwashed to believe APPLE is some kind of non-profit?

Ed Lorusso · Top Commenter
So many comments of the same kind and follow along as if no lasts? Dogmatic please move along.
So mommy sits at the same table and follows along on her laptop. Doubtful, unless mommy has nothing else in the world to do.

Reply · 2 · Like · Yesterday at 7:11am

Frank J. Heller · Top Commenter · Liberty High School
Mommy is out working, Daddy is raising the kids these days...the same daddy who learned his technical skills at corporate distance learning webinars and knows the technology works a lot better than classrooms.

Reply · Like · Yesterday at 8:38am

Amy Beth Brochu-krikken · Top Commenter · University of Southern Maine
I enjoyed both the article above, and the ensuing conversation below. I recently took my children out of school, and I could not be more excited about their possibilities. The article kind of glossed over one of the major reasons that parents decide to homeschool: gifted children. Children that are bored out of their head in school and parents that are tired of trying to get their child's needs met within the system. Because the years go by and still the needs are left unmet. At some point, you jump off the cliff and just do it yourself. Thankfully there is a community of people that we can connect with. It has been two weeks, and we have taken a Tinkercad course and designed trinkets that were then printed on a 3D printer, gone to the planetarium, started an entrepreneurial Ed. program, and organized HTML and Photoshop classes for other homeschoolers in June. I am pleased about the recent approval of Connections Academy. Parents in Maine need more choices for all of our children, this is a step toward that end.

Reply · 15 · Like · 18 hours ago

Amy Bilodeau · University of Maine at Augusta
I need to pick your brain...you are such an inspiration Ms. Amy.)

Reply · 1 · Like · 11 hours ago

Linzy Brekke Aloise · Boston, Massachusetts
Go Amy, go Amy, go go go! We are spoiled for choice in greater Boston but I know kids everywhere need more options!

Reply · Like · 9 hours ago

Pam Brochu · KVCC Fairfield, Maine
A little scary, lots of hard work, but very fulfilling! Dad says, "vote republican for school choice, and break up the monopoly on education"... it's too early for this debate! :) have a good day!

Reply · 1 · Like · 9 hours ago

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