Photo by Pexels

Cyber schools should get equal funding

Online education helps vulnerable students

By Molly Macek | May 2024

Cyber schools face funding cuts once again, according to the school aid budgets passed by the House of Representatives and Senate last week. At-risk students who attend online schools may lose out on critical services as a result.

While cyber schools – public charter schools that educate their students through internet platforms – risk losing funds, all other public schools will likely receive more money for each student they enroll next year. Gov. Whitmer and lawmakers in both chambers have proposed an increase in the per-pupil foundation allowance. This is the base amount of financial support guaranteed to every school district and charter school in the state, according to Proposal A.

The Executive Budget as well as the budgets passed by the House and Senate all increase the foundation allowance. Whitmer proposed raising the base funding from $9,608 to $9,849 for every student enrolled in public schools. The House's version recommends that districts receive an extra $217 per student, and the Senate's version calls for a $302 increase.

> " **These schools serve some of the state's most vulnerable students.** "

But cyber schools will get less money per student, even though these schools already receive less funding than conventional public schools. Unlike conventional districts, charter schools can't raise local property taxes to supplement their funding. They are therefore limited to the state's per-pupil foundation allowance and any federal dollars they receive to support their economically disadvantaged students.

Whitmer and the Senate prefer that cyber schools only receive 80% of the foundation allowance that's allocated to conventional public schools. The House version of the budget is slightly more generous but would still give students in cyber schools less than those in public schools.

One of these students is Anna Dietderich, a 17-year-old who attends Michigan International Prep School – a full-time, K-12 online charter school – instead of a conventional public school in Milford Charter Township, her district of residence. Like many other students who attend cyber schools, Anna transferred to the online school because it provided a refuge from the bullying she endured while enrolled at her district school.

"It was really hard to get into the building… Bullying was such a bad thing… Everyone thinks it's OK," Anna said in an interview with Michigan Information and Research Service.

Anna's story is not unique among students at cyber schools. These schools serve some of the state's most vulnerable students. In addition to bullying, factors like homelessness, mental illness, health issues, pregnancy and fear for personal safety prevent many students from attending school in a typical, in-person setting.

Compared to the conventional classroom, the online learning environment provides a more flexible platform for engaging with students and giving them the individualized support they need, when they need it. At Michigan International Prep School, each student receives multiple layers of support from a mentor, course instructors, and social workers or other support staff.

When asked about the individualized support she's received as a student at Michigan International Prep School, Anna said, "If I'm being 100% honest, it has saved my life."

Amy Dunlap, Director of Family Engagement, Marketing, and Legislative Advocacy at Michigan International Prep School, believes that online learning has a number of advantages over conventional classrooms. In an interview with MIRS, Dunlap explained that students can tailor their experience by engaging in either real-time or asynchronous learning. Teachers can devote more of their attention to students like Anna thanks to the flexibility this type of learning environment affords.

"In the virtual world, I'm able to say, OK, I'm going to focus on Anna for a half hour today, just Anna… You're able to use small groups, you're able to take away all those distractions and all those classroom management pieces and really focus on the student," Dunlap said. "That, to me, was my saving grace in my career."

Budget cuts targeting cyber schools will make it harder for them to deliver the level of support that's proven to be a critical lifeline for students like Anna. While online learning isn't for everyone, it's an important alternative for students when conventional schooling doesn't work for them. Lawmakers ought to prioritize – not cut – funding to these schools so the state's most vulnerable students can continue to benefit from their services.

Available online at: www.mackinac.org/v2024-14

Dr. Molly Macek is the director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

MACKINAC CENTER
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

www.mackinac.org

/MackinacCenter

@MackinacCenter