

LEHIGHVALLEYLIVE.COM

Here's what cyber charters cost Lehigh Valley taxpayers and why it's being called 'unacceptable'

By Sara K. Satullo | For lehighvalleylive.com | Posted February 21, 2019 at 08:15 AM | Updated February 21, 2019 at 02:24 PM

10
shares

14 Comments

A new report has found cyber charter school reform could save Lehigh Valley taxpayers \$11 million a year and save \$250 million statewide.

The report by the progressive advocacy group Education Voters of PA finds that reforming Pennsylvania's cyber charter school funding could save millions annually and improve student outcomes.

Cyber charters are public schools that educate students online from home. Cyber schools are publicly funded and privately operated.

Under the state's 1997 charter school law, cyber schools are reimbursed as the same rates as brick-and-mortar charter schools despite having much lower operating costs.

The report echoes familiar cyber charter school criticisms.

None of Pennsylvania's 15 cyber schools, which are authorized by the state, earned passing grades during the five years when the state issued School Performance Profile scores. Last year, the majority of cyber schools landed in the bottom five percent for educational performance in the state, according to Pennsylvania Department of Education data.

"If cyber charter schools improved student educational outcomes in Pennsylvania, an argument might be made to justify paying them a premium above what it costs them to educate children," the group's Executive Director Susan Spicka said. "Regrettably, this is not the case. Pennsylvania's cyber charter schools are notorious for poor academic performance."

PA Coalition of Public Charter Schools Executive Director Ana Meyers called the report a "pile of one-sided garbage from an organization that is against parental choice and only wants more money for school districts even if it is against the best interest of the children."

Parents deserve to have cyber charter schools as an option, she said.

"Cyber charter schools are a positive option for families and it should be the parents, who know their children best, who decide where their child attends school," Meyers said.





Stock Exchange Photo

All 500 school districts in the state pay different cyber and charter school tuition rates even when students attend the same school. The rates are set based upon a district's total spending less certain expenses.

Currently, cyber charter tuition rates range from \$7,300 for a regular education student to more than \$40,000 a year per special education student, according to the report. Cyber schools cost taxpayers in 2016-17 more than \$463 million.

Pennsylvanians could save more than \$250 million a year statewide if the state changed its cyber school tuition calculations, the group reports. It recommends setting a \$5,000 per regular ed pupil rate, which could be adjusted as costs rise, and setting a \$8,865 special education per pupil rate via a calculation using the special education formula.

The regular cyber school tuition rate is based on what it costs school districts to provide in-house online programs, according to the report.

Cyber charter schools cannot operate with \$5,000 per pupil, Meyers said.

"Cyber charter schools have many expenses that are often not discussed such as state testing, technical support, family services, computer purchases for students, internet reimbursement for families, learning management services, enrollment services just to name a few," she said.

Every child enrolled in a cyber school receives a computer and internet reimbursement.

This debate ignores the fact that cyber schools are a great value because they save districts money, Meyers said.



"For every student who attends a cyber charter school, school districts have additional money to support the students who remain in the district school," she said. "On average, cyber charter schools received just 72 percent of the per pupil allotment for each student."

Public school supporters always dispute this argument,

"Cyber charter school tuition bills harm both taxpayers and students who remain in district schools," Spicka said. "When a student and his tuition go to a cyber charter school, not all of the student's cost leaves the district school. For example, the school district doesn't pay less for heat or for maintaining buildings and grounds when some students leave the district. When a handful of students in each grade leave, the district can't cut teachers to reduce costs without significantly raising class sizes or eliminating courses. As a result, school districts are often forced to raise property taxes, increase class sizes, or cut educational programs in order to pay cyber school tuition bills."

Another factor is that many students who attend cyber charter schools were homeschooled or enrolled in private schools beforehand, the report states.



Sara K. Satullo | For lehighvalleylive.com

Many Lehigh Valley school districts began offering their own in-house cyber school programs in hopes **of luring back cyber students**. Students are able to earn district diplomas and participate in extracurriculars while studying at home.

Districts say they're able to offer their cyber academies for a fraction of what they'd otherwise have to pay to an independent cyber school, while being able to control for educational quality.

Since opening its cyber academy, Bethlehem Area School District's cyber enrollment went from 304 students in 2012-13 to 217 this year.

State Sen. Judith L. Schwank, D-Berks, has reintroduced **a bill** that would allow school districts providing their own equivalent cyber education programs to not pay tuition to cyber school. The bill was referred to the Senate Education Committee, which local state Sen. Pat Browne chairs. A similar measure in the state House was referred to the House Education Committee Tuesday.

The charter school coalition contends that cyber charters and a district's cyber program are very different.



"Comparing the two is apples to oranges as cyber charter schools offer significantly more opportunities as far as academics, family communication and extracurricular activities, both virtually and in-person," Meyers said.

The report is missing crucial data, she said. Districts should be more transparent about their in-house cyber programs.

"It is time for schools districts that run cyber programs to track academic progress, attendance, special education rate and growth," Meyers said. "School districts must show their data before any conversation can be had regarding cyber charter school funding reform. Only after we know how district cyber programs are performing would any policymaker be able to make an informed comparison to cyber charter schools. "



Sara K. Satullo | For lehighvalleylive.com

What should the cyber tuition rate be?

Education Voters of PA supports setting flat cyber charter tuition rates for every district in the state.

Regular education students: \$5,000

A 2018 survey by the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators found that 93 percent of school districts that offered cyber school options were able to do it for \$5,000 or less per regular education student.

Special education students: The report came up with an \$8,865 per pupil on average tuition rate. That's what it should cost a district with a typical proportion of each level of special education students enrolled in cyber charter schools.

It arrived at this figure by applying Pennsylvania's special education funding formula to yield different tuition rates for the three tiers of special education.





iStock Photo

What do Lehigh Valley schools spend on cyber charters?

Here's a look at what cyber school tuition costs school districts in Lehigh and Northampton Counties.





Sara K. Satullo | For lehighvalleylive.com

Total cyber school tuition: \$4.73 million

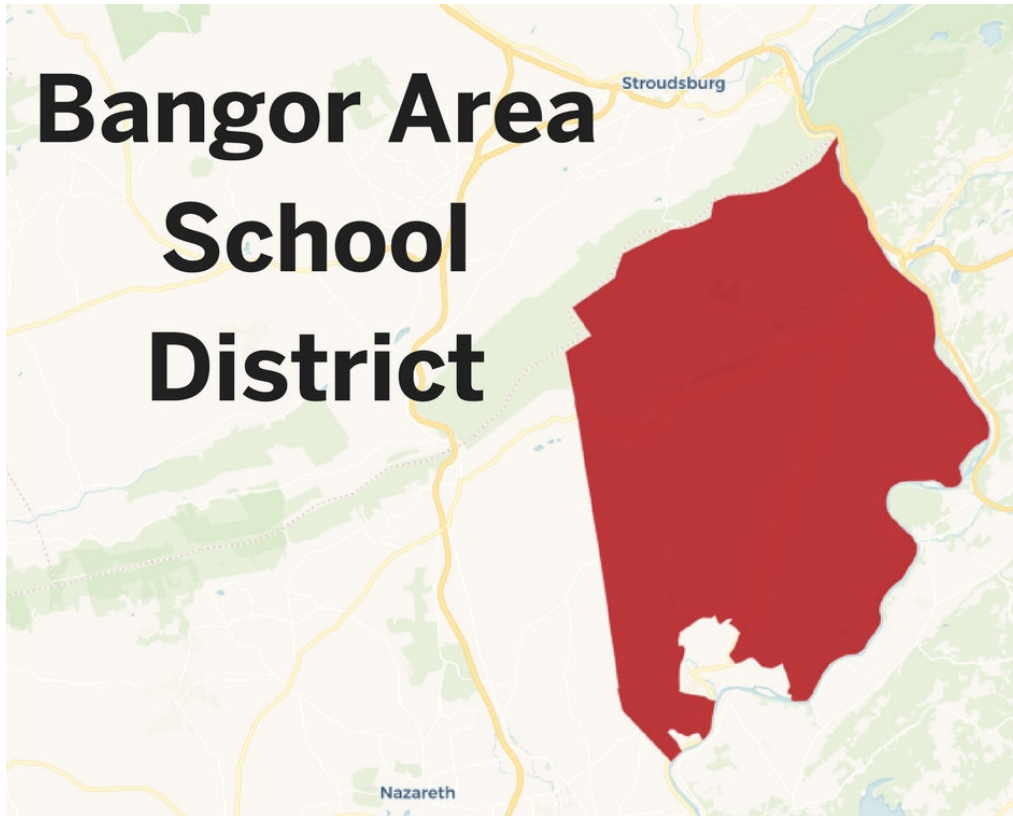
Current tuition rates

Regular education: \$9,286

Special education: \$21,939

Possible cyber charter savings: \$2.4 million





Sara K. Satullo | For lehighvalleylive.com

Total cyber school tuition: \$848,063

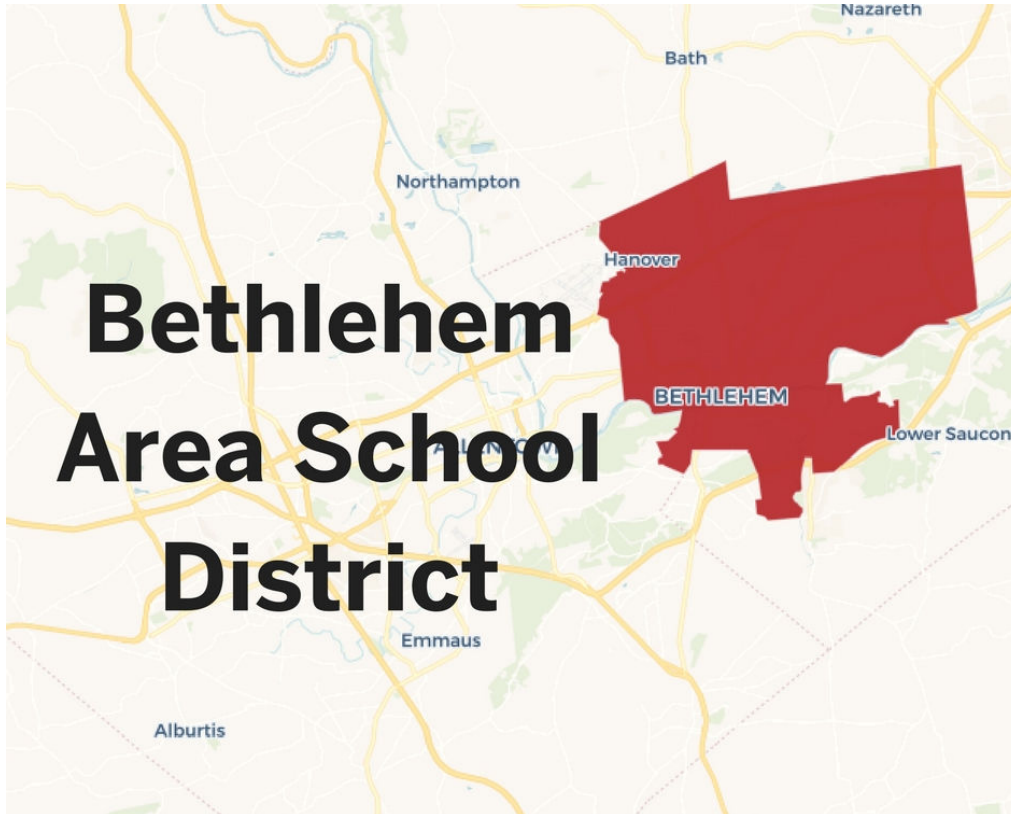
Current tuition rates

Regular education: \$11,390

Special education: \$26,405

Possible cyber charter savings: \$223,669





Sara K. Satullo | For lehighvalleylive.com

Total cyber school tuition: \$2.79 million

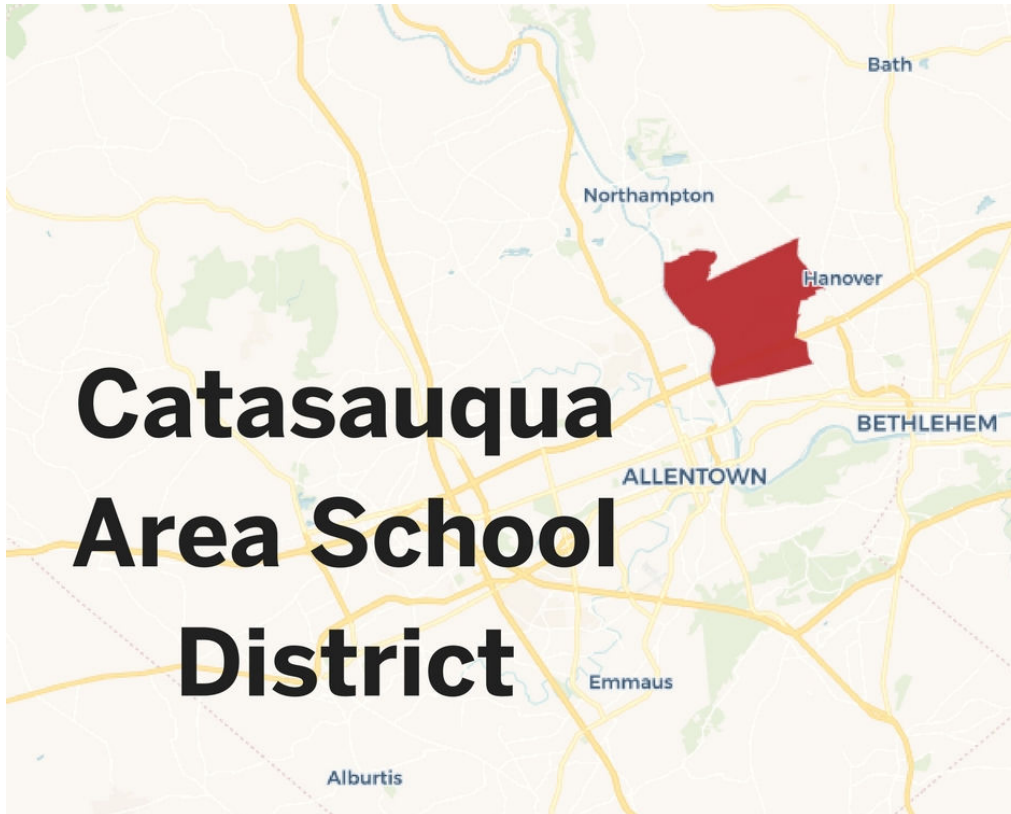
Current tuition rates

Regular education: \$10,627

Special education: \$22,767

Possible cyber charter savings: \$1.55 million





Sara K. Satullo | For lehighvalleylive.com

Total cyber school tuition: \$446,908

Current tuition rates

Regular education: \$11,963

Special education: \$26,594

Possible cyber charter savings: \$286,801



Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our **User Agreement** (updated 5/25/18) and **Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement** (updated 5/25/18).

© 2018 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved (**About Us**).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.

Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

Your California Privacy Rights

 **Ad Choices**

