

WASD Charter School Expenses Projected to Reach Record High

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—BY WARREN HOWELER—



Jason Bottiglieri

The Wyalusing Area School District, like many other districts within PA, have struggled with the cost of cyber charter schools.

However, that rising cost is approaching record levels locally as Wyalusing is expected to spend over \$942,000 on this expense for the current school year.

Through the first six months of this 2021-2022 fiscal year, the district has paid a total of \$471,015.93 to cyber charter schools throughout the state.

Projecting out for the remainder of the current fiscal year, the district could pay a total of \$942,031.86 in cyber charter school bills.

For the last fiscal year, 2020-2021, the district paid a total of \$775,195.73 in cyber charter school expenses.

That number represented a 37 percent increase over the figure the district paid in the 2019-2020 school year, which was \$566,768.85.

For the 2021-2022 school year, there are a total of 71 students in the Wyalusing Area School District who are enrolled in cyber charter schools.

Under the PA Public School Code, cyber charter schools—or charter schools in general—do not charge tuition for students.

Instead, they receive most of their funding from their students' resident school districts.

In the case of the Wyalusing Area School District, the tuition expense rate for a regular education student attending a cyber school is \$13,355.32.

For a special education student, that number is calculated at \$27,317.17.

“I continue to have concern with the rising cost of cyber schools and have advocated with legislators to support reform related to these costs and also increase state accountability of cyber school performance,” said Wyalusing School Superintendent Dr. Jason Bottiglieri.

Five years ago, the district created its own cyber school called the Ram Virtual School (RVS) “in an effort to allow students who wanted that specific educational experience,” Bottiglieri stated.

“The RVS program provides a more financially responsible option to our taxpayers and has increased academic rigor when compared to other cyber schools, and provides the value of a Wyalusing Valley High School diploma upon graduation,” he said. “Regarding tuition costs, RVS is less than half of the amount of the other cyber schools.”

Recently, Bottiglieri teamed with some state advocacy groups and other colleagues in the education field to encourage state legislators to introduce a bill that improves the financial reconciliation process for when there is a disagreement between the school district and a cyber charter school regarding attendance, enrollment dates and legal residency.

“Currently, this process is flawed and allows the cyber school to essentially take the money they claim to be owed and forces districts to file appeals,” he said. “This is a cumbersome process that rarely generates positive results. For example, districts have horror stories about how flawed the system is and the needed reform. In one example, a district has paid cyber tuition fees for students that don’t live in the district and have to fight the state for a remedy. This wastes administrators’ time and taxpayer dollars all because the cyber school’s record-keeping ability is subpar and they charged the wrong district.”

It is also disturbing to see the vast amount of money being spent by cyber charter schools on advertising, Bottiglieri added.

“Cyber charter schools falsely advertise that their school is free—indeed it is not,” he said. “Those are taxpayer dollars used to pay the cyber charter tuition, advertising, sponsorship of various recruitment material and paraphernalia that is circulated. Billboards can be seen—which cost significant dollars in advertising—as a recruiting effort. In one recent example, a citizen shared with me their visit to a professional sporting arena included an executive suite area sponsored by a cyber charter school—all paid with taxpayer dollars.”

Additionally, under the current state law, each school district in PA is required to pay cyber charter schools a tuition rate that is based on a formula.

This generates a tuition rate that is different for each public school district, Bottiglieri stated.

“Why does the same cyber school get a different amount of money from every district for the same education?” he said. “It is a flawed system.”