



**Urgent**

3/6/02

## **Fact Sheet (revised): How Virtual Charter Schools Threaten Public Schools**

Proposed virtual (or cyber) charter schools would undermine public school funding, tie children to computers, and allow corporations to make large profits at the expense of Wisconsin taxpayers. Support for this statement comes from Ohio and Pennsylvania where newly opened virtual charter schools are causing problems and generating lawsuits. Unfortunately, two Wisconsin school boards are poised for preliminary votes on March 11 and 15 with final votes to follow. Many public school parents, teachers, administrators, and supporters are as yet unaware of this issue.

Now is the time to act. Suggestions for what can be done are outlined below. It would be much easier and better to prevent charters from being granted than to have to counter their serious negative effects through the Legislature and the courts once they are established. But even if you receive this fact sheet after the final votes, it is still important to inform others about this serious issue.

### **Background**

Virtual charter schools are public schools. They are funded by tax dollars; chartered by local school districts; and operated by using computers for instruction, lesson plans, and documentation of completed work.

Sylvan Ventures (part of Sylvan Learning, a corporation focused on profiting from public and private education) is seeking a charter from the Appleton Area School District to open Wisconsin Connections Academy (WCA) and offer grades K-8 in the fall of 2002. To date, no such Sylvan Connections Academy has received a charter; they have been denied charters in North Carolina, Massachusetts, Denver (Colorado), and twice in Minnesota. A committee of the Appleton School Board is scheduled to vote on Friday, March 15 on whether to recommend that the school board grant the charter.

At the same time but separately, Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WVA) is seeking a charter from the Lake Mills School Board to open a virtual charter school in the fall of 2002 for grades K-5. WVA would get its curriculum, software, and possibly its computers from K12, an on-line school. The Lake Mills School Board is scheduled to act on this request on Monday, March 11.

### **Ways Virtual Charter Schools Undermine Public Schools**

- **Over 400 school districts would lose students and state aids (at least \$5000 per pupil, more for special education students) to virtual charter schools while the few districts that had chartered virtual charter schools collected state aids for students from outside their district.** To be sure, supporters of virtual charter schools may claim that they are primarily targeting homeschoolers and others not currently enrolled in their district of residence plus students public schools consider to be problems. That may be true for the first year or two. But if virtual charter schools became established, they would soon be looking for larger markets and trying to enroll regular public school students, meaning districts will lose current students to districts that granted charters. In other words, virtual charter schools might bring a few school districts a few more students, dollars, and jobs, but at the expense of other districts and to the long-term detriment of the public school system.
- **Virtual charter schools are a stepping stone to vouchers.** They rely on state-mandated tests as a justification for funding and blur the distinction between public and private schools.
- **Out-of-state corporations would use virtual charter schools to make large profits by taking advantage of a unique combination of education laws in Wisconsin that were written before virtual charter schools.** (con'd)

First, under Wisconsin's charter school law, written to support local control, charter schools only need the approval of a local school board. Thus it is much easier to get a charter here than in states where proposed schools have to stand up to the scrutiny of the state department of education. This is why we now face the unusual situation in which 12 members of two school boards will decide whether Wisconsin will suffer the widespread negative effects of virtual charter schools. In addition, corporations, armed with large marketing and legal departments, can take advantage of school districts' lack of experienced financial, management, and legal staffs to negotiate contracts that favor the corporations at the expense of districts and taxpayers.

Second, in Wisconsin the state pays an unusually high proportion of the costs of education, up to 67%. This means the state, rather than local school districts, would have to pay the cost of virtual charter schools it had no opportunity to review or deny. And fewer people would be aware of what was happening than in states like Pennsylvania where the school districts in which virtual school students reside have to pay the chartering district themselves. In Wisconsin, large sums of state aids would go directly through virtual charter schools to corporations without other school districts realizing that they were really losing students and money to the chartering district and the corporations. So-called local control would be turned into corporate control through technology.

- **Virtual charter school students' test scores would reduce public confidence in conventional public schools.** Rote learning based on computer work is very limiting to students, but it would prepare them to score well on state-mandated tests, probably better than conventional public school students do.

- **Virtual charter schools would decrease the amount of money taxpayers expect and are willing to pay for public schools.** Virtual charter schools could be operated very inexpensively. Most of the work would be done by unpaid parents. WVA projects a teacher/student ratio of 1/50. There would be no expenses for classrooms, transportation, sports, etc. Even factoring in the substantial profits organizers and contractors expect to make, virtual charter schools could be run for substantially less than the \$8,500-9,000 per pupil conventional public schools currently spend. (According to an article in the February 25, 2002 *Akron [Ohio] Beacon Journal*, "Other states show that such operations can cost from \$900 per student per year to about \$3,000.")

- **Taxpayers' insistence on cutting school budgets and high test scores of virtual charter school students could easily force schools into reliance on computers** at the expense of students' learning and well-being and teachers' jobs.

- **Virtual charter schools would be detrimental to families that live in the districts that charter them.** There would be expectations of higher test scores and lower costs for schools, greater emphasis on computers, and possibly huge bills for lawsuits. (Since local school districts are responsible for granting charters in Wisconsin, it would seem that they would also be targets for lawsuits like those in Ohio and Pennsylvania.)

- Both common sense and evidence from authors like Jane Healy tell us that **the computer time required of virtual school students would be detrimental to their physical, mental, and emotional health.** The risks are especially serious for young children. How are children who spend many hours of their school days interacting with a computer and following its instructions and who experience the world primarily through "virtual field trips" going to relate successfully to the real world?

- **Virtual charter schools would introduce a profit motive that would compete with schools' current goals.**

## What You Can Do

The short-term strategy is to get Appleton and Lake Mills to deny the charters or at least table them at the meetings on March 11 and 15 or at their meetings for final votes a few weeks later. Now is the best time to act, but if you receive this Fact Sheet after the votes, it will still be important to inform others.

- For more information, visit WPA's web site at [www.homeschooling-wpa.org](http://www.homeschooling-wpa.org) and click on "Issues and Legislation."

- Inform others. Copy this fact sheet or download it from WPA's web site (see preceding point). Mail, email, or hand deliver copies to parents, teachers, school administrators, PTAs, school board members, and concerned citizens.

- Write a letter to the editor of your local paper. A sample letter can be downloaded from WPA's web site.

- Encourage local school boards, professional associations, and other appropriate organizations to discuss and pass resolutions opposing or at least expressing concerns about virtual charter schools.

- If you are a school district administrator or have other basis for doing so, contact the district administrators in Appleton and Lake Mills. Also, call any appropriate professional organizations.

- If you are a school board member or have other basis for doing so, contact school board members in Appleton and Lake Mills.

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Note: WCA and WVA are separate entities. Specific statements made about one of them in this Fact Sheet should not be assumed to apply to the other.