Akron offers charter-school options to combat dropouts, transfers

By Doug Livingston
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The Akron public school district has a new plan to slow, if not reverse, the flow of students and state dollars to charter schools.

The district has launched a four-month pilot program to provide online courses through a Columbus area charter school and an educational service center near Cleveland.

Administrators hope to populate the program with 300 elementary students they've identified as living in Akron but either home-schooled or attending a charter school.

Another 40 Akron high school students who have fallen behind on graduation credits will be able to log onto computers in school buildings to take classes they still need. The hope is that they will not drop out to enroll in a dropout recovery charter school, most run in a similar fashion by Akron-based White Hat Management.

Together, virtual and dropout recovery charter schools account for roughly 40 percent of the 3,409 students and $28.3 million in state funding Akron Public Schools loses to charter schools.

"That is the reality of the situation," Superintendent David James said after publicly announcing the pilot program this week. "We are in a competitive world."

The plan

Akron administrators deliberately waited to announce the program until families had been contacted, though few have signed up or attended the first two of four informational sessions.

Administrators didn’t want to attract students who are not suited for online learning, which requires a certain level of independence and motivation from the student and a commitment from the family.

The program would offer current Akron high school students a school-based, online education provided by the Virtual Community School of Ohio, an online charter school overseen by Reynoldsburg Local School District near Columbus.

The elementary students would engage teachers and classmates on remote discussion boards and electronic messaging through Lincoln Interactive, an online curriculum provider to be administered by the Cuyahoga County Educational Service Center.

James said state funding following the students, which would be less for the online-only students, would be shared equally with either partner.
administrators founded in 2002. This time, the school board is creating an additional course option, not an independent charter school that would compete with Akron Public Schools for students and money.

James said the wide array of extracurricular activities and educational options in Akron Public Schools could appeal to students.

Students languish online

Akron Public Schools is again attempting to succeed where so many online endeavors have failed.

Other Ohio school districts and a handful of for-profit companies have embraced online charter schools as the remedy for Ohio’s dropout dilemma.

However, the proliferation of these schools has been accompanied instead by an increase in dropouts, pushing Ohio in a direction opposite from the national rate.

The revolving door of dropouts at the computer-driven online charter schools makes it difficult to track whether they help or hurt student learning; 14 of Ohio’s 24 online charter schools received no graduation and academic grades on last year’s state report cards because of low or turbulent enrollment.

The 10 that did have scores were among the worst in Ohio.

The highest graduation rate in the group was 23 percentage points below the state average.

The group’s average academic score on state tests was 71 percent, comparable to the high-poverty urban districts of Cincinnati, Akron and Canton and better than Cleveland, Dayton, Youngstown, Columbus and Toledo public schools. However, more than three-quarters of students who attend the online charter schools live outside Ohio’s Urban 8 school districts, so the students are not comparable.

Two, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) and Ohio Virtual Academy (OVA), enroll 21 percent of Ohio’s roughly 123,500 charter school students.

ECOT and OVA are run by Altair Learning Management and Virginia-based K12, Inc., respectively. They rank last among all 2,565 Ohio schools — charter and traditional public — in terms of how much the typical student learns in a year, according to the Ohio Department of Education’s value-added index scores.

OVA and ECOT accounted for more than half of all Ohio students who dropped out last year.

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