

Public Charter Schools

By Kathi Kearney

While they aren't here yet, the arrival of virtual charter schools in Maine is inevitable. Now is the time to educate yourself and others about the different educational choices available in our state.

There are a number of differences between the various educational choices in Maine. Homeschools, approved private schools, non-approved private schools, and public schools are each distinct legal entities, and come under different laws and different regulations. All are legitimate choices for education, but legally they are distinctly different entities and should not be confused with each other. These distinct legal entities actually protect all the different options as unique choices for your child's education. If they are confused with each other, then the potential exists for each of the options to end up with more, different, and possibly very inappropriate, regulation. This is as much true for the *public* school options as the private school and homeschooling options.

It is very important to remember that charter schools (virtual or otherwise) are PUBLIC schools.

If you enroll your child in a charter school, your child will be a PUBLIC school student regardless of the location where the education takes place. This is the same situation as a public alternative program student (a program used most often with at-risk high school students). A public alternative program is actually available to any public school student with approval and supervision by the principal and superintendent. Like a charter school, the education in this situation may take place outside a public school's brick-and-mortar walls. However, the student is still a PUBLIC school student.

As a PUBLIC school student in a charter school, your child will have to take the state assessment tests, and be subject to many, many other public school requirements regarding testing, curriculum, tracking by the Maine Department of Education, etc. The public virtual charter school (not the parent) will determine the curriculum, and will have the final say about programming, grading, etc.

Enrolling in a virtual public charter school is NOT homeschooling (even if the child does the majority of his or her work at home).

However, it is important to note that ALL of the school choices available to Maine parents (public brick-and-mortar schools, public charter schools, public virtual charter schools, approved private schools, nonapproved private schools, and homeschools) have the option to use virtual online education for all or part of their programs.

Many public schools already use virtual online courses for some students. Some examples include online programs for accelerated or remedial math, use of the online Yale OpenCourseWare to provide advanced instruction in English for students who have already completed Advanced Placement English

courses, online college courses, and "blended" courses, where part of the course is online and directed by a teacher in the district, with some "live" components).

Many homeschoolers have used kindergarten through grade 12 virtual online courses for years. Popular providers include Bob Jones University, the University of Nebraska, the University of Missouri, Brigham Young University, Texas Tech University, Clonlara School, Laurel Springs School, Virtual School for the Gifted, Duke University's TIP Program, EPGY, Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth, K12 and ALEKS Math. There are many, many others.

Many Homeschoolers, as well as a few public and private schools, also have taken advantage of the large number of free online courses available through university OpenCourseWare programs. These programs were originally piloted by MIT, but now dozens of universities have put the content of their courses online, as well. "Live" free online courses are now offered by Stanford University in computer science, and a wide variety of other available materials (including free AP online courses located over at the Internet Archive).

Right after Hurricane Katrina the owner of the Hoagies Gifted Education Page, and I reviewed and compiled a list of free online high school level courses, and put up the links and the reviews. It was obvious that kids affected by the hurricane were going to be scattered across the U. S. and that some of them would not be in school for a while. Since then, the page has been maintained because of its use by Homeschoolers and small or low-income public and private schools. The page remains the most-accessed page on the entire (large) Hoagies site. Here is the link to the courses there:

http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/online_hs.htm

Finally, if you are a creative homeschooler who would like to create and set up your OWN virtual online courses, you can access the free online course software shells offered by virtual course provider Blackboard. Blackboard has recently made up to five FREE course software shells available at a time to teachers: <https://www.coursesites.com/webapps/Bb-sites-course-creation-BBLEARN/pages/index.html>

The free software shell is pretty robust and comparable to the university-paid versions of Blackboard. If you, as a homeschooler, would like to use virtual online courses for part of your child's high school program, you are certainly able to do so without having to enroll your child in a public virtual charter school.

In summary, while it is clear that enrolling in a virtual public charter school is NOT homeschooling, homeschoolers do not have to forego all virtual education opportunities to maintain homeschool freedoms. In fact, (and as is often the case for homeschoolers) the best virtual options are most likely the ones that not controlled by public schools, and can be carefully and freely chosen by parents for the unique circumstances and needs of the child.

For more information on the legal definitions of various education choices in Maine, go to Maine statute Title 20-A: EDUCATION at uscode.house.gov/pdf/2007/2007/usc20.pdf