



Policy Brief:
Revisiting Cyber Charter
School Performance

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The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) is currently [reviewing](#) applications for three new cyber charter schools. This development, along with the state's release of new School Performance Profile (SPP) scores, makes this a fitting time to update Research for Action's (RFA's) November 2013 analysis of the performance and oversight of the sector.

Our 2013 [review](#) found:

- Cyber charters were consistently among the very lowest performing schools, as measured by the state's SPP scores.
- Just five of 16 Pennsylvania cyber charter schools operating at that point publicly reported annual student enrollment and withdrawal data. These five schools had higher student transfer rates than any brick and mortar charters with comparable available data (87 schools).

Our findings in Pennsylvania reflect national trends. A 2014 report on virtual schools in the U.S. by the National Education Policy Center noted that despite growth in online education nationally, "there is little high-quality research to support the practice or call for expanding virtual schools."ⁱ

This updated analysis shows that cyber schools continue to lag far behind both traditional public and charter schools on the state's performance measure, and average cyber performance trails behind the average performance for the state's highest poverty school buildings, which tend to face the greatest challenges in meeting state performance standards. Importantly, we could not replicate the intra-year enrollment analysis for 2013-14, as this information is no longer available in the annual reports for *any* Pennsylvania cyber charter schools.

The first section of our analysis, while limited to some extent by this lack of data, employs publicly available data to compare cyber sector performance against both traditional public schools and brick-and-mortar charter schools. It is followed by a breakout of key demographic indicators by sector, and section on student mobility.

Cyber Charter School Sector Performance Lags

PDE released SPP scores for the 2013-14 academic year earlier this month. These measures are meant to provide the public, school officials, and policymakers with a comprehensive, comparable view of student achievement across the state. A school's rating, reported as a single

score on a 0-100 scale, is derived from as many as 30 indicators. Most indicators are based on student performance on state tests.

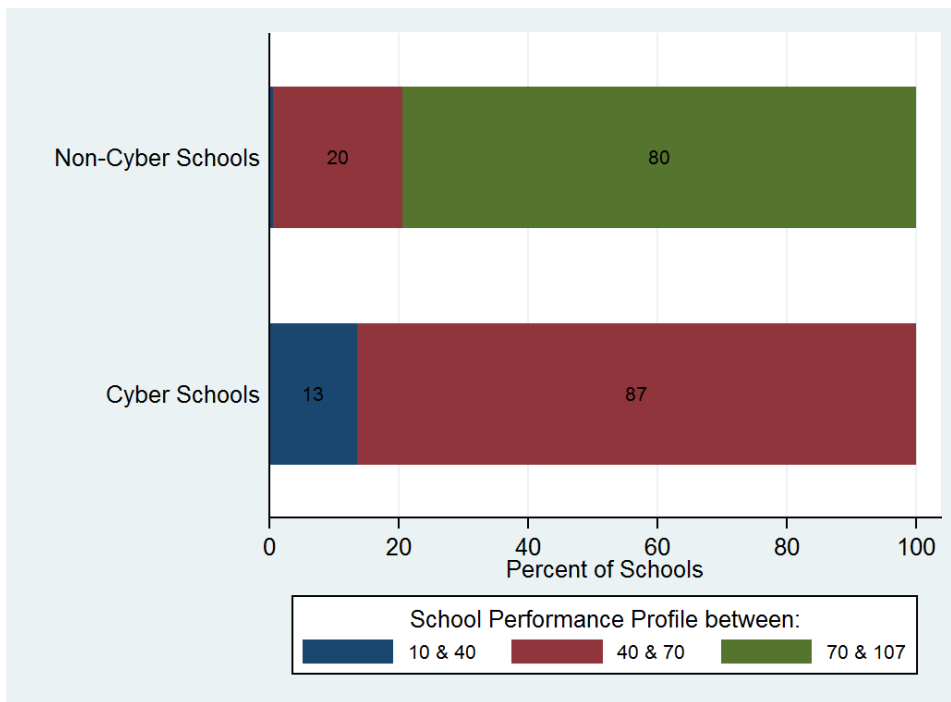
RFA’s analysis of the first year of SPP results (2013) revealed that, as a sector, cyber charters scored far below both traditional public schools and brick-and-mortar charters. Table 1 replicates this analysis but includes the figures for those schools whose 2013-14 SPP scores had not been released as of our last report.

Table I. Average, Median, Minimum, and Maximum SPP scores, 2012-13: Statewide and By School Type

SECTOR	YEAR	N SCHOOLS WITH SPP	AVERAGE SCORE	MEDIAN	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM
Traditional Public Schools	2012-13	2,838	77.0	79.1	11.4	101.4
	2013-14	2,765	76.9	78.5	13.0	101.4
Brick-and-Mortar Charters	2012-13	150	66.1	66.8	22.5	94.2
	2013-14	153	65.1	65.1	31.2	96.7
Cyber Charters	2012-13	16	46.7	45.7	29.0	67.9
	2013-14	14	48.7	49.4	28.9	66.0

To date, no cyber charter recorded an SPP of 70 or higher, which state education secretary Carolyn Dumesq has described as a “mark of moving toward success.”ⁱⁱ Every cyber charter was below the median SPP for both traditional public schools and non-cyber charter schools. Figure 1 presents the distribution of performance across decile ranges. The numbers above each line indicate cyber charters scored in the given SPP band.

Figure 1. Distribution of School SPP Scores, Non-Cyber Schools Versus Cyber Schools, 2013-14

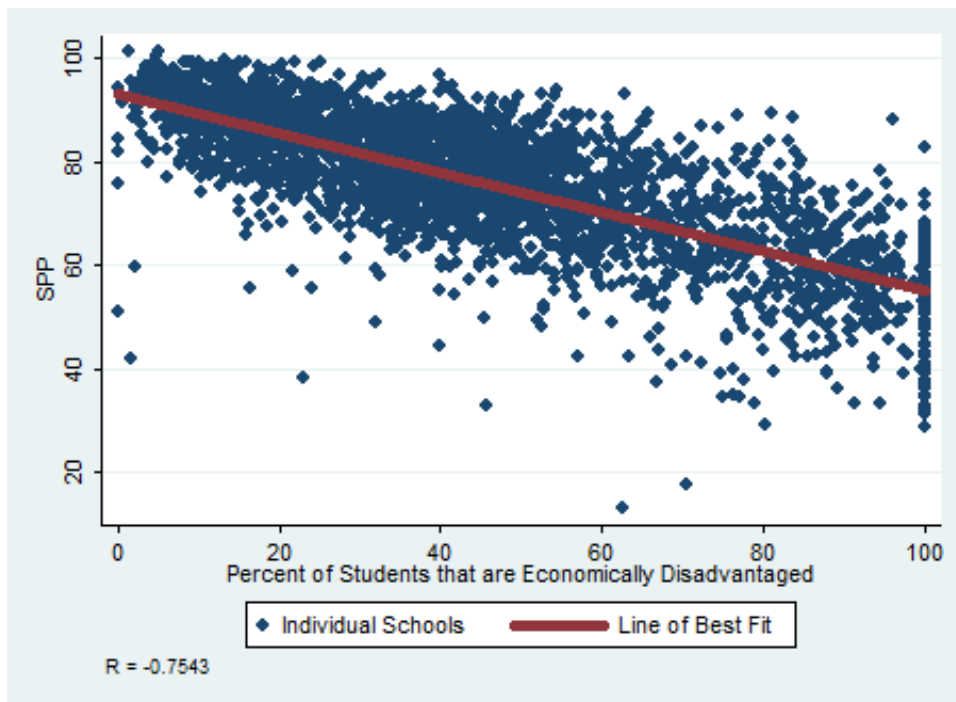


Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education School Performance Profiles.

The validity of SPP as a measure of school quality is suspect due to its heavy reliance on test scores that are highly correlated with socioeconomic characteristics of students that are beyond the control of schools.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, RFA's [analysis](#) of the 2012-13 SPP scores revealed that SPP scores were heavily correlated with the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in a school building.

Our review of the 2013-14 SPP data finds a similar pattern, as can be seen in Figure 2.

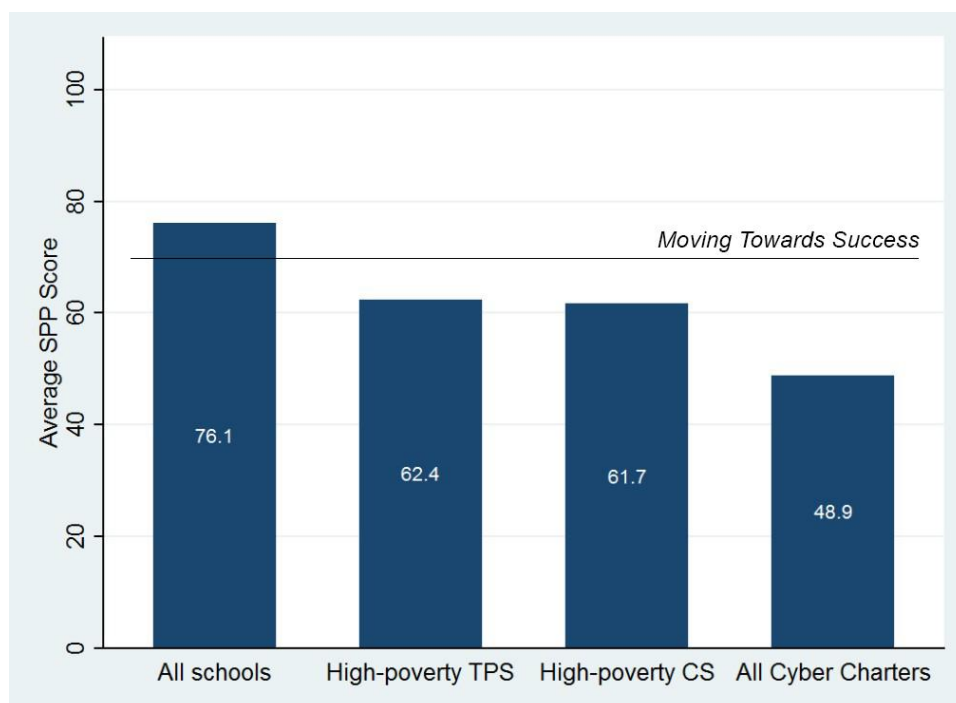
Figure 2. All Pennsylvania Public Schools by SPP Score and Poverty, 2013-14 School Year



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education School Performance Profiles.

Still, it's important to note that despite the fact that SPP is negatively correlated with the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, cyber charter schools come up short even in comparison to the highest-poverty traditional public and charter schools. Figure 3 displays the average SPP score for all schools in Pennsylvania, followed by the scores among the highest-poverty traditional and brick-and-mortar charters, and the average for all cybers.

Figure 3. Comparing High Poverty Traditional Public and Charter Performance to Cyber Sector, 2013-14



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education School Performance Profiles.

Characteristics of Cyber Charter Student Population

Despite the loss of two cyber charters schools, the sector’s enrollment increased approximately 5.5 percent from 2012-13 to 2013-14, bringing total cyber enrollment to more than 36,500 students. Table 2 compares student composition of traditional public, brick-and-mortar charter, and cyber charter schools.

Table 2. Student Characteristics by School Type, 2013-14

TYPE	N SCHOOLS	TOTAL ENROLL	% WHITE	% BLACK	% HISPANIC	% ECON DIS	% ELL	% SP ED
TPS	2,765	1,587,958	71.91%	12.61%	9.09%	42.38%	2.81%	14.59%
Charter	153	90,131	22.95%	54.10%	16.83%	67.91%	3.68%	14.79%
Cyber Charters	14	36,596	69.40%	17.29%	7.83%	48.39%	0.45%	18.06%

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education School Performance Profiles. Table includes data only for those schools with SPP scores.

Cyber charters fell between traditional public schools and brick-and-mortar charters on most student characteristics. However, cyber charters have the lowest percentage of English language-learners and—unlike last year—the highest proportion of special education students.¹

¹ Brick-and-mortar charters have the highest average proportion of economically disadvantaged students, English language-learners, black students, and Hispanic students, partially because over half of the state’s brick-and-mortar schools are located in Philadelphia.

Significant Growth in Cyber Charter Special Education Population

Special education made up the bulk of increase in cyber charter enrollment in the last year. From 2012-13 to 2013-14, the population of special education students in Pennsylvania cyber charters jumped 23.5 percent, according to PDE data. The increase in total number of special education students outpaced the increase in non-special education students during this period.

Table 3. Enrollment Change: Combined Cyber Charter, 2012-13 to 2013-14²

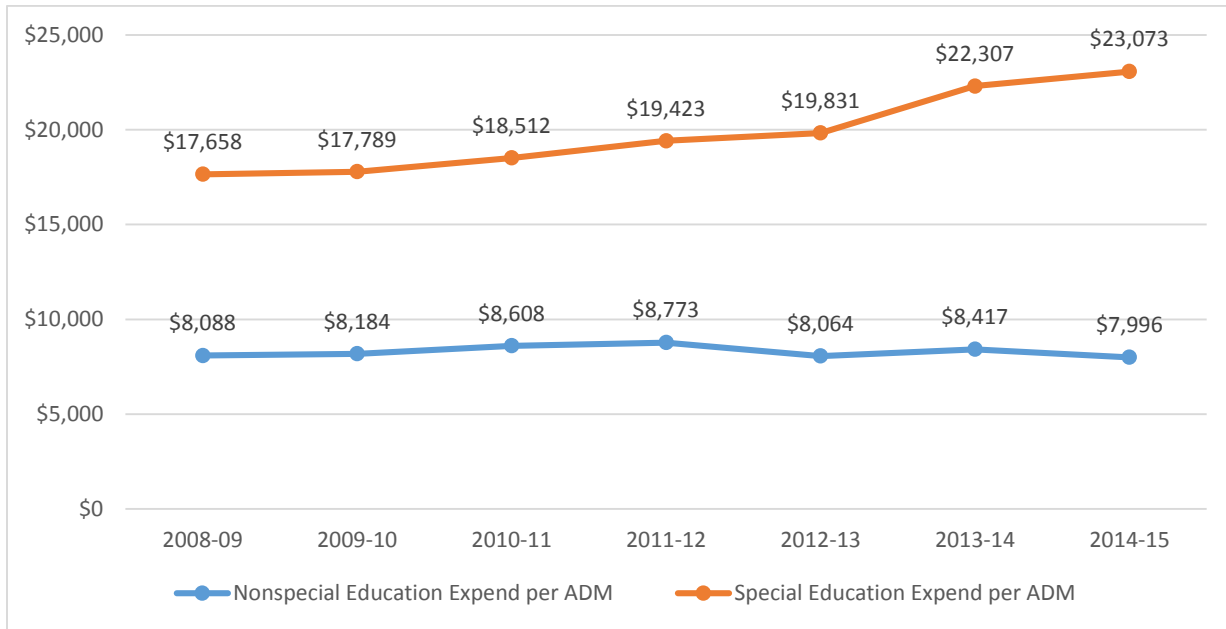
SCHOOL YEAR	NON-SP ED ENROLL	% INCREASE	SP ED ENROLL	% INCREASE	TOTAL CYBER ENROLL	% CHANGE
2012-13	29,675		5,019		34,694	
2013-14	30,396	2.43%	6,200	23.53%	36,596	5.48%

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education Charter School Enrollment – 2008-2014

This growth has significant cost implications for school districts, as Pennsylvania’s current school funding policy does not distinguish between enrollment in cyber and brick-and-mortar charters. School districts are responsible for paying charters a state-prescribed amount for every student who lives within district boundaries and attends a charter. The amount is larger for special education students, and is determined, in part, on what the sending district spent overall on special education in the prior academic year. The large per-pupil transfer of funds from districts to charters for special education students has already garnered criticism because Pennsylvania’s special education funding formula provides incentives for charters and cyber charters to over-identify special education students.^{iv} Figure 4 displays charter school tuition rates for non-special and special education students within Philadelphia School District boundaries as an example.

² The percentage of special education students reported in Table 3 differs slightly from the percentage listed in Table 2. The source data for the two tables comes from different PDE sources with conflicting information on the total number of special education versus regular education students (the total count of cyber charter students is identical in both files). We used the SPP Fast Facts file for all metrics in Table 2 to maintain consistency, but the Charter School Enrollment file for Table 3 because it included data for 2012-13.

Figure 4: Philadelphia Charter School Payment Rates for Non-special Education and Special Education Students based on Average Daily Membership: 2008-09 to 2014-15



Source: PA Department of Education website, retrieved on November 11, 2014.

Student Mobility No Longer Reported

Test scores and other descriptive indicators do not present a full picture of the cyber charter sector. Detailed information about cyber charter enrollment patterns--the flow of students to and from these schools--would advance our understanding of the sector's performance. High rates of student turnover within single academic years have been [reported](#) by news outlets, and substantiated by our 2013 analysis. If the pattern holds, it would signal additional cause for concern with regard to the state's cyber charter schools, as research indicates student mobility – especially among vulnerable populations – is linked to academic outcomes. ^v

RFA's 2013 analysis reported:

Cyber charters have both higher average and median rates of students transferring in and out during the school year as compared to brick-and-mortar charters. ... 93 percent of brick-and-mortar charters had transfer-out rates below 22 percent. In contrast, 22 percent was the minimum transfer-out rate among the cyber charters we reviewed.

Our analysis was based on publicly available 2010-11 and 2011-12 annual reports provided by the cyber schools. These reports did not present enrollment information uniformly, which restricted our analysis to five schools with usable information. While the 2010-11 and 2011-12 reports are no longer linked on PDE's charter school annual report webpage, the following presents a screenshot of how the data was reported by one cyber school in its 2012 annual report.³

³ As of November 13, 2014. Source: http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/annual_reports_and_enrollment_data/7357

Figure 5. Screenshot of Agora Cyber Charter 2012 Annual Report

October 1, 2010	
Grade	Enrolled Students
Kindergarten	381
1st Grade	333
2nd Grade	353
3rd Grade	317
4th Grade	335
5th Grade	382
6th Grade	408
7th Grade	504
8th Grade	533
9th Grade	945
10th Grade	814
11th Grade	608
12th Grade	531
Grand Total	6444

303 students withdrew during the month of October due to various reasons such as transfer to another education entity, non compliance with compulsory attendance, plan to pursue GED, relocation, etc 164 new students enrolled by the start of November.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education Charter Annual Report, June 27, 2012. Retrieved by RFA in November 2013.

Notably, the 2013-14 annual reports on the PDE website contain no similar enrollment trends for any of the state's cyber charter schools. As a result, we are unable to provide an update at this time. At minimum, state officials should make cyber charter enrollment and transfer data available and accessible to the public.

Conclusion

Consistently poor performance on state assessments by cyber charters is sobering, especially in light of the fact that cyber enrollment continues to grow, with a marked increase in special education students. It is also troubling that comprehensive and consistent data are not available on PDE's website to fully examine the sector's performance. However, the initial analyses included in this document should be reviewed carefully as state policymakers decide whether to expand this sector.

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- ⁱ Molnar, A. (Ed.); Rice, J.K., Huerta, L., Shafer, S. R., Barbour, M.K., Miron, G., Gulosino, C, Horvitz, B. (2014) *Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2014: Politics, Performance, Policy, and Research Evidence*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved Nov. 13, 2014 from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2014>.
- ⁱⁱ Chute, E. (December 11, 2013). New assessment shows fuller picture of Pa. schools. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Retrieved from: <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/region/2013/12/11/Pennsylvania-updates-PSSA-and-Keystone-scores-for-schools-statewide/stories/201312110135>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sludden, J., Beaver, J.K., Park, E., Kumar, A., Giau, J. (2014). Governor Corbett's expanding excellence program. Research for Action.
- ^{iv} Pennsylvania Special Education Funding Commission Report (December 11, 2013). Retrieved from: <http://senatorbrowne.pasenategop.com/special-education-funding-commission/Special-Education-Funding-Commission-Report-121113.pdf>
- ^v Xu, Z., Hannaway, J., & D'Souza, S. (2009) Student transience in North Carolina: The effect of school mobility on student outcomes using longitudinal data. [Working Paper No. 22]. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. Retrieved from: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1001256_student_transience.pdf