

**Parent Perceptions Regarding their Exceptional Child's Experience in  
Cyber/Virtual School**

by

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## Parent Perceptions Regarding their Child's Experience at PA Cyber Schools

John Mozzocio

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### **Abstract**

Cyber schools are full-time K-12 public schools that combine traditional and online learning practices. They are called cyber schools because digital technology plays a crucial role in the learning process. The present research paper is a thorough review of virtual/cyber schools for children with disabilities. The review is from different objectives and perspectives such as parents' perspectives, participation, and role, students' perspectives, legal perspectives, bullying of and by the children with disabilities, and the status of cyber charter school during COVID-19. The analysis indicates that though cyber schools are under scrutiny for their performance, they have become the preferred option of the parents and students due to its flexibility, safe learning environment and personalized teaching pedagogy.

***Keywords: PA Cyber Charter Schools, Parents' perspectives, Bullying, performance, COVID-19.***

## **Dedication**

To my mother, Dolores, for instilling in me the virtue of patience

To my father, Anthony, for ingraining the principle through hard work all things are  
possible

To my children, Johnpaul, Jaxon, Jino, Jazelle, Jenalise and Jewelise, you are my  
reason, my guiding light, shining perpetually on the path of achievement

To my wife, Jenna, you are my truest passion, the most valued parts of my life are  
owed to you

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Over the duration it's taken to complete my studies and reach this point in my work, I've known a persistent constant, the steadfast love and support of my family. This work would be incomplete without honoring their roles. In the mornings I'd accepted total defeat, the sound of my wife and children in another part of our home immediately realigned my focus. A house is only as sturdy as the first brick laid, so too is one's life's work, only as successful as it's the foundation. Jenna, I'm immensely grateful for your partnership in life. Everything we've attained and accomplished has been garnered through focus and catalyzed by perseverance and diligence. You challenge me in the best of ways with your wit, intelligence, and boldness. My sons Johnpaul, Jaxon, and Jino are authentic exemplars. Johnpaul, your natural leadership, Jaxon, your bold passion, and Jino, your empathy, and your charisma all encourage me to be more. My beautiful girls Jazelle, Jenaluse, and Jewelise, you are the joy of my life. When I look at you, I see Jazelle's intelligence, Jenaluse's determination, and Jewelise's fierceness. You inspire my strength and encourage an insatiable audacity.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Cyber charter schools are the school of choice as it facilitates more options and opportunities for families. Parents perceive it as a more flexible option than the traditional school patterns. The charter schools that use online classrooms or the blended learning environment are known as the cyber charter school in which the instructions are given online. Cyber charter schools are approved by the state and government bodies. The virtual model of education is practiced in three different ways: independent, asynchronous, and synchronous. Some of the benefits of cyber charter schools include high-quality interactive learning, allowing educational choice to the children, improving their learning outcomes, and personalized teaching.

It has always been challenging for teachers and parents to teach students with disabilities and special needs. Special Education Need (SEN) is associated with students with learning disabilities, both physical and psychological. They suffer from behavioral, emotional and communication disorders, and some of them have learning deficiencies. Such students need special attention to minimize their distractions and enhance their engagement in learning. Different learning styles are suitable for the kids with learning and thinking differences or any disorder.

Families use Cyber charter schools mainly because they are the school of choice. According to Parham (2020), charter schools and special education align with their goals, serving the needs of a specific group of students with the personalized educational model. Special education in the United States has been regulated by federal, state and local laws. Under special education law, it is mandatory for the public schools to adapt to the child and not force the child to adapt to school. Under

the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), public schools cannot reject any students according to the 'zero reject' policy. It is mandatory to evaluate the students with disabilities in a non-discriminatory manner. The students in the charter schools must be guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Parents' role in the education process is very crucial. Students must be served in the least restrictive environment. Parents have the right to raise a complaint if they do not feel satisfied with the education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) has given the percentage of children with different kinds of disabilities. This percentage is as follows:

<b>Disability Category</b>	<b>Percentage of Children</b>
Specific Learning Disability	33%
Speech or Language Impairment	19%
Other health impairment	15%
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	11%
Developmental Delay	7%
Intellectual Disability	6%
Emotional Disturbance	5%
Multiple disabilities	2%
Hearing impairment	1%
Orthopedic impairment	1%

The researcher is faced with many challenges regarding the programs overseen, one of which is ensuring a Free Appropriate Public Education for all students while optimizing services provided as well as budgetary fiscal responsibility. During the yearly budget process the researcher looks for ways to educate students in their neighborhood schools while minimizing costs to the district. This creates a win-win situation as students are educated with their non-disabled peers and the district is able to save money from sending students to out of district placements. A huge emphasis is placed on recruiting students who have left the district to cyber programs. The cost for a special needs student to attend is approximately \$24,000

dollars which is much more than the per pupil expenditure. This trend has piqued the researchers' curiosity on school choice and cyber programming. The researcher would like to garner further understanding of parents' perceptions of virtual and cyber schooling. In light of the Covid pandemic all special education students and parents were able to experience virtual education. Should the district continue to lose students to cyber programs the state funding will see further decreases straining the administration to fund appropriate programs and offer FAPE to all students.

**Aim and Objectives:**

The research aims at reviewing the cyber/virtual schools in the state of Pennsylvania.

Under this aim, the present paper is based on the following objectives:

1. To focus on the history of school choice
2. To discuss the creation of cyber charter schools.
3. To review the parent's role and perception towards various issues, including educational pattern, bullying.
4. To review the New Castle Area School District in Pennsylvania as a case study while handling children with special needs.
5. To review the effectiveness of virtual education to the parents and the students
6. To review virtual/cyber schools on the background of COVID-19

**Research Questions:**

The following research is based on the following research questions

How effective are virtual/cyber schools for children with disabilities?

What are the roles of the parents and teachers in virtual/cyber schools?

Are virtual/cyber schools better options for children with disabilities?

What is the situation of virtual/cyber schools during the recent pandemic?

### **Significance of the study:**

In the case study chapter, we will be discussing the case study of Pennsylvania virtual/cyber schools. There are contradictory opinions about cyber charter schools. According to some researchers and scholars, cyber schools are effective in educating students with disabilities and special needs. On the contrary, some of the researchers are against cyber charter schools. According to them, it hampers the academic progress of the child. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education School Performance, cyber school children are the lowest in their performance. Following is the statistics presented (Green, 2014)

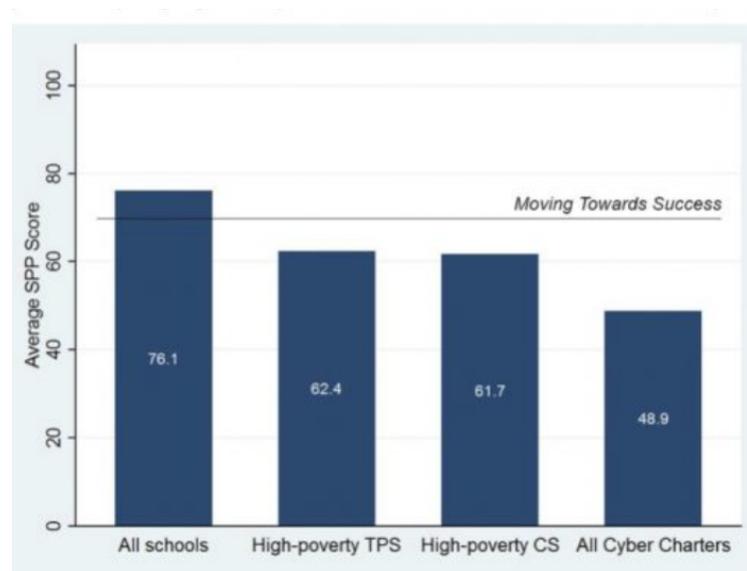
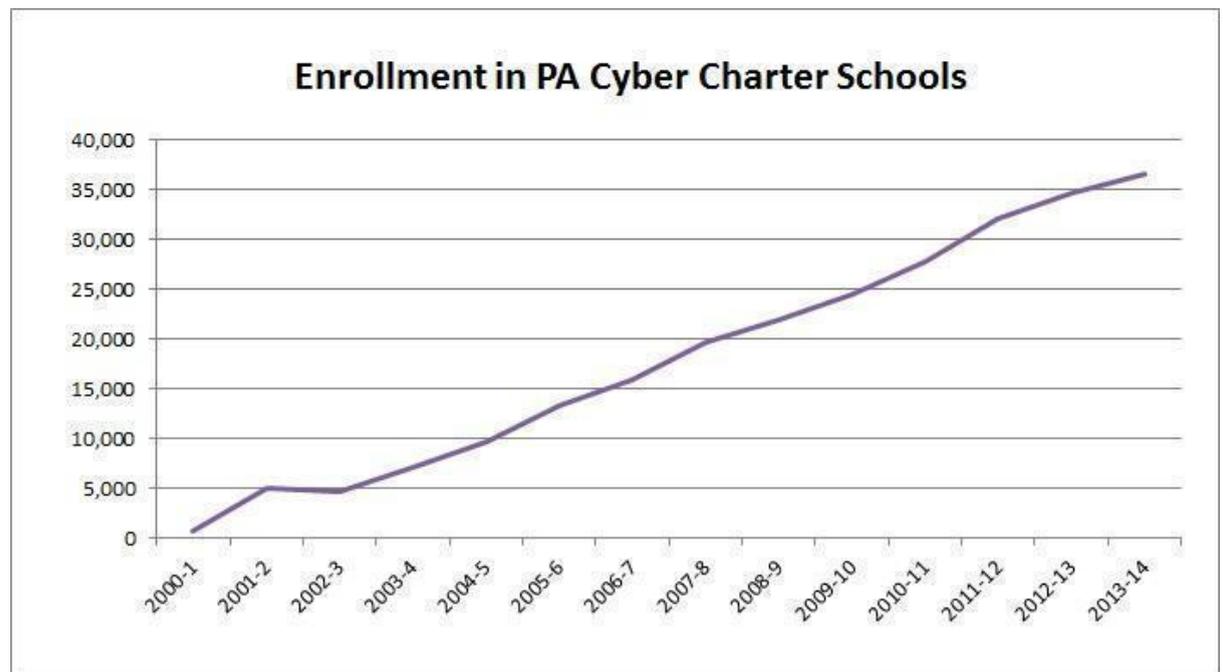


Fig. 1: Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education School Performance Profile in Greene (2014)

The score of all cyber charter schools was 48.9% below the average of the brick-and-mortar schools in Pennsylvania. Not a single cyber charter school can show an SPP of 70 or higher than that. That is why the department is reviewing the new cyber school applications and thinking about whether to grant permission for more cyber charter schools. However, the enrollment in cyber school in the same year (2014) was showing consistent growth. (see fig. 2)



Source: Reid (2015)

In the last year (2020), more than 14000 new students enrolled in PA cyber schools. The enrollment rose during the pandemic. Therefore, it is necessary to check whether there is any positive correlation between pandemic situations and the new trend of parents and teachers preferring cyber schools.

It is important to know the current status of PA cyber-charter schools, the legal aspects involved in them and the reasons behind their popularity. The study is also significant, especially on the background of the recent pandemic. Cyber charter schools have already adopted online teaching and learning methods. It can be

assumed that these schools have a sophisticated and state-of-the-art setup to serve the children and engage them in the virtual world.

It is also important to know whether cyber charter schools will answer the parents of children with special needs, especially while dealing with bullying. It is because students with disabilities tend to be the victims of bullying.

### **Important terms and definitions**

#### Charter School

Charter School is the school that is funded by the government; however, they operate independently of the established school system of the state in which the cyber school is situated.

#### Students with Disabilities or Students with special needs (SEN)

SEN is the students or learners who have some physical disabilities (hearing impairment, orthopedic issues etc.), emotional and behavioral problems and need extra efforts and special attention to make them academically competent.

#### Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

ASD is a disorder that adversely affects the nervous system, and as a result, the cognitive, emotional, social and behavioral health of the person are affected. Children with ASD have a common problem with skills relating to communication. They also face difficulty in social interaction.

#### Cyber/online/virtual school

Cyber school can also be called an online, virtual or e-school in which the internet and digital technology are widely used to teach the students.

### Personalized education

Personalized learning is an educational approach in which the learning structure is customized and designed to meet the needs, skills and interests of the students. It is a student-centric approach, and each student feels that he has been considered and regarded individually.

### Bullying/ Harassment

Bullying or harassment is unlawful and harmful conduct that insults or offends the person. In the cyber setting bullying takes form as taunting, teasing, threatening.

### **Summary of the Chapters**

The present research aims at reviewing the PA cyber schools thoroughly. In the first chapter (Introduction), the topic was introduced with the keywords cyber charter schools and the students with disabilities. The researcher designed aims and objectives, and accordingly, the research questions were designed. It is important to explain the importance of the study. With this view, the significance is analyzed in detail. There are some new jargon and concepts. The definitions of the concept have also been incorporated in the present chapter.

The second chapter is Literature Review. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, the history of the school choice movement is reviewed. Cyber Charter Schools stem from the history of school choice in America. The school choice movement that emerged in the 1950s was reviewed with the help of previous studies. In the same section, the Supreme Court's decisions, legal cases, and various educational laws are also discussed and reviewed. The review was taken from the 1950s to the present. The system of school choice is defined and discussed.

The second section of the literature review focused on the creation of the cyber charter school. The term is defined by various scholars. The purposes of cyber charter schools are also discussed. The backbone of cyber charter schools is the collaboration and fine-tuning between parents and teachers. The previous studies have focused on this issue. These studies were reviewed to have a deeper insight into this collaboration.

The third section was on the parents' and students' perspectives on cyber charter schools and the bullying and harassment of and by the children with disabilities. Some key studies were referred to review the parents' and teachers' opinions about cyber school and their past experiences about the old schools.

The third chapter is the research methodology in which the research philosophy, types and approach of the research is mentioned. Some ethical issues have also been discussed. The fourth chapter will discuss the data analysis and results of the study. The fifth chapter will provide a summary and conclusion of the study. Limitations and future research will be reviewed.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### History of School Choice

The school choice movement in the United States has its roots in democracy, autonomy, and freedom of choice legislation. It was one of the historic reforms in the educational sector. The period between the 1950s and 60s was crucial in the emergence and establishment of the school choice movement. The historic *Brown v. Board Education* decision in 1954 was the responsible factor behind the school choice movement that increased the diverse opportunities in K-12 education. There were two opposite viewpoints seen among the scholars and educationalists. For example, Friedman (1962) perceived that schools should be considered from business perspectives. As the competition among businesses in the marketplace, there should be competition among schools to facilitate an efficient school system. To sustain in the competitive environment, the school should focus on maximizing the students' overall performance. Friedman (1962) also suggested that the underperforming schools should be forced to shut down, and the mediocre schools would be forced to improve their performance. Friedman thus perceives school as a business entity, schooling as a service, and children as both product and customers. The educational sector is thus seen through a political and economic lens in those days. Friedman's thought is excessively practical and rational, and no consideration of the children's academic and psychological development is there. Education is a service rather than a mere business. However, capitalist thoughts seldom think of the social and ethical aspects of the school choice movement.

Unlike the capitalist ideas of Friedman, the modern school choice movement supporters postulated the socialist or liberal ideas. According to these scholars, the school of choice is needed to promote children's educational opportunities from deprived communities (e.g., poor children and children of color). Such liberal viewpoints were aligned to the transition period of American society during the Civil Rights Movement. The Northern civil rights activists boycotted the racially segregated schools in Boston, Chicago, and other such places. The alternative schools were set up with some key objectives such as

- (1) to raise academic achievement for the black children
- (2) to dramatize the inadequacy of the existing public schools, and
- (3) to develop racial pride by teaching subjects that organizers believed the traditional curriculum ignored (Forman, 2005).

It was not mandatory for the teachers to have the necessary credentials. The teachers perceived the education in a broader outlook. It was rather a matter of justice against racial discrimination.

Among them was Nonviolent High School in McComb, Mississippi, established in 1961 by the northern civil rights workers committee, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It was the response to the discriminatory treatment given to the black children in southern high school. Considering the Mississippi education system's loopholes, the schools for black children were established (Forman, 2005). The objectives of the school were to impart the same education that the European white students received to black students.

Along with science, the students were taught languages and art. This provides them opportunities to develop their critical thinking, which according to the

reformists, were essential for the development of the black students. The schools adopted the student-centric approach that would help the children gain a quality education. Freedom school was the concept that came from the SNCC worker Charlie Cobb, who depicted black classrooms in Mississippi as "autocratic and intellectually stultifying places that emphasized rote memorization and discouraged critical thinking". The school freedom process was started during the 1960s. It was described by Carawan and Carawan (2007, 148) as follows:

*The men (and some of us when we have time) work on the building up to 10 hours a day with a 100 [degree] sun beating down and the humidity so high one's clothing becomes soaking wet after only a few minutes work. The building is guarded at night because these people, after having had their homes shot into and having a couple of crosses burned in the middle of their community during the last few months, do not intend to have all their hard work go up in flames right away.*

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act came into effect in 1965. The free school concept also emerged in the same period. The free schools stemmed from the liberal approach and response to the capitalist approach. The founders of the free-schools were active participants in the Civil Rights movement. The free schools were founded to keep them aside from the traditional (racial segregation) system. The founders of the schools strongly believed that free schools would fulfill the community's needs (Miller, 2002). The free schools, according to Forman (2005) were the early charter schools. The organizers collaborated with the philanthropists and the universities to gain financial support. There was a difference between Mississippi Freedom Schools and free schools, which is the difference in curriculum, which was race-based. White free schools encouraged their students to cherish their interests and

to express themselves. But the black free schools were structured with no opportunity for self-expression. The traditional method of teaching-learning was followed in Black free schools.

During the 1970s, after the Civil Rights Movement, a new concept emerged in the school system. It was known as Magnet Schools, evolved from the Civil Rights Movement (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Magnet schools are public schools with specialized courses or curriculum. “Magnet” refers to how the schools draw students from across the normal boundaries defined by school zones. Like magnet schools, controlled school choice also emerged in the same period. These schools provided opportunities to the parents to choose schools. This reform also helped to keep racial and ethnic balance in schools. The efforts for ethnic balance were taken through legislative means. The efforts were also made to keep the school diverse with the presence of students from diverse racial backgrounds.

During the 1980s, the school choice program further expanded. The national school reform also helped to set new goals for the school. Much work was done on curriculum, school management and further expansion of school choices (Levin 1998). Mondale and Patton (2001) also focused on the trend of business leaders' involvement in the school reformation in the same period. It was essential to keep the nation best in the competition of excellence with the leading countries of the world. It was the perception of the business leaders that there should be a connectedness between academia and industry. The industry people wanted the schools to shape and mold the students for fulfilling the corporate needs. The corporate, public and educational leaders were included to share their perspectives regarding the educational reform and quality enhancement. The main role of these stakeholders was to assess the quality of education imparted in schools, colleges and universities by

comparing it with the educational quality of the other countries (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). A Nation at Risk report spurred educational reform in 1983 and contributed to the ever-growing assertion that American schools were failing. The commission noted that the Federal government plays an essential role in helping meet the needs of key groups of students such as the gifted and talented, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, and the handicapped. The commission also noted that the Federal government also must help ensure compliance with constitutional and civil rights, and provide student financial assistance and research and graduate training.

Thus, it was a time when the education in America started thinking beyond racial segregation. It was a wider thought that goes beyond racial debates, and it was a reform in a sense. Several recommendations are suggested, such as maintaining high standards and quality in education, testing the students, offering parents a choice and allowing schools to get into the competition for attracting students (Junge, 2014). The corporate model of competition and parental choice became widespread and popular rapidly.

The nation's first voucher program started in the 1990s. It was called the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. The legislation allowed low-income students to enroll in nonsectarian private schools at taxpayers' expense (Levin, 1998). The then-president George Bush appreciated the program and granted a \$1000 scholarship to students from low-income groups. The Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program was initiated in 1995 by the Ohio legislature. In the late 1990s, many options were opened in school choice. They include contract schools, vouchers and scholarships, tax credits and deductions, magnet schools, and intra- and inter-district public school choices (Finn, 2005).

With the emergence of the 21st century, the school choice options continued to grow and gained substantial political support. Kane and Wilson (2006) focus on the political efforts in the school reformation process. The political leaders, including President George Bush to improve schools by adopting innovative approaches. In 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act* was outlined that further supported the school choice. It was decided that the schools that failed to maintain quality and innovativeness must offer their students to transfer their admission to another school in the district. The school performance and quality were strictly monitored, and the schools were given six years to show their performance. After six years, if their performance was not satisfactory, they had to report the school as a charter school or allow any private management company to control and operate the school (Kane & Wilson, 2006). During the Obama government, the reform plan was further continued. The low-performing schools would remove the school administration and teaching staff and turn the school into charter school operators (Duncan, 2009).

## **Legal cases of School Choice**

### ***History of Brown v. Board decision***

For understanding the history of school choice, it is essential to know the historical background of the Brown v. Board decision that laid the foundation of school choice. The decision was a milestone when the Supreme Court ruled that segregating children on a racial basis is unconstitutional. The decision was a step ahead towards racial segregation prevalent in America since the nation's foundation. Supreme court justice Earl Warren delivered the ruling in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. While explaining why segregation is

unconstitutional, the court stated that it was a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which says (Nelson, 1998),

*No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.*

This decision was the end of the "separate but equal" precedent of the Supreme Court set 60 years prior in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. The *Brown v. Board* decision further motivated the civil rights movement. In the subsequent year, the Supreme Court judge read the court's unanimous decision known as *Brown II*. The Supreme Court instructed the states to start with the desegregation policy immediately.

The Supreme Court's decision was highly criticized by some scholars, stating that the decision was made by relying heavily on the information procured from social scientists. The established laws were disregarded while making such a decision. According to legal scholars, the decision means creating new law by surpassing the constitutional power.

The decision was welcomed and supported by the minority groups. However, there was no specific direction the Supreme Court had mentioned. According to the decision proponents, the Supreme Court had not surpassed its power but used it appropriately.

### **Bolling v. Sharpe**

Bolling v Sharpe case objected the racial segregation in the public schools of Columbia district. The petitioners in the case were the African American students who complained that they witnessed racial segregation. The lead plaintiff was the African American boy Spottswood Bolling, who was keen to attend all-white Sousa Middle School. These students were refused admission in the public school attended by the Whites. This refusal was purely out of the racist attitude of the school administration. The issue was that racial segregation in school violates the fifth amendment. When the case was on board, the school was dominated by White children. Today, the school has zero white students. It concerns them to think whether desegregation is implemented in the school. Desegregation means the presence of students from diverse races and ethnicities. In the absence of white students, it cannot be concluded that the school becomes neutral. The Sousa students have the opportunity to choose school options.

### **The Impact of School Choice Reforms**

Several scholars in their research have focused on the impact of school choices. The school choice program allows the traditional school to improve its quality. Miron, Evergreen, and Urschel (2008), in their policy, focus on school choice and its impacts on students' achievement. The existing research has found mixed impact. Some of the studies observed positive impacts on achievement, while some of them found negative impacts of school choice. The authors concluded that the high-quality Voucher systems have a positive impact, especially on African American students (Miron, Evergreen, and Urschel, 2008).

Regarding the impacts and outcomes of school choice education, there are two arguments. Home-schooling has a mixed impact, both weak and mediocre. The quality of Charter Schools is also found mixed; neither too good nor too bad (Miran,

Evergreen, and Urschel, 2008). Vaughn and Witko (2013) view school choice as a means to increase student engagement. The school choice is an opportunity for them to attend the school suitable to meet their needs. The school choice helps to keep the children in the school system. The high level of students' engagement leads to positive academic outcomes. The study of Vaughn and Witko (2013) concluded that when the number of choices is higher, students' engagement level is also higher. The students from the public schools are more engaged when they have more options available than children with fewer options.

The school choice also induces the public schools to be more productive. When they are productive, their chances of becoming the school choice of the students are high. Hoxby (2003) hypothesized, "when students can leave, money follows students (even if imperfectly or indirectly)." In such a situation, the less productive schools have to lose students. The author also found that the academic achievement of the students increases when they attend the choice school. These findings were consistent with the research of Vaughn and Witko (2013).

### **System of School Choice**

When Miron, Evergreen, and Ursche (2008) referred to Voucher and Charter Schools, it is important to know these two concepts. Hoxby (2003) focuses on these two types of schools. In voucher schools, the students receive a coupon or a voucher, which they carry with them to the school they have chosen. After the enrollment of these students, the school receives the revenue of the amount mentioned on the voucher. This revenue comes from public funds. The voucher can be used in both public and private schools. However, for using the vouchers, the private schools need to meet certain criteria. Secular and accreditation private schools can participate in the voucher system. Usually, the voucher students are admitted by carrying out a

lottery. However, in some schools, a selective admission process is also practiced. As mentioned above, the funds are public, and they come from local, state or federal governments. "Topping up" the voucher is the system that sometimes is allowed and sometimes not allowed. Hoxby (2003) states that topping up is when the school can charge tuition fees that exceed the amount of the voucher. The parents need to pay it from their pocket.

Charter schools are chartered by the government or the agencies appointed by the government. Such schools never practice positive selective admissions, such as excluding students who underperform the admission tests or interviews. On the contrary, they are required to use a lottery system in the selection process. The selection is based on the negative characteristics of the students as well, for example, the students who are likely to drop out of school. Topping up the fees is also not allowed in charter schools, unlike the voucher system. The charter schools must abide by the rules and regulations regarding racial discrimination, church-state relations etc. The charter schools are also compelled to meet government-designated criteria, which are restrictive. The key drawback of the charter schools explained by Hoxby is that these schools are vulnerable to political issues and attacks as the government bodies run them. The easy process of changing schools provides the students more opportunities to find the best matching school.

### **Summary**

Previous studies have focused on the history of school choice in America from economic, political and racial dimensions. It is a widely discussed issue with contrast viewpoints. The idea of school choice emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. The key issue was to fight against racial segregation in schools. Historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court proved responsible for the school

choice. Some scholars saw vouchers as an opportunity for the poor and non-white people to uplift themselves with quality education.

According to Milton Friedman, the parents should be given a choice.

Friedman perceived school to be the marketplace and expressed the need to keep the performance high. He viewed that the voucher plan was the partial solution. Thus, Friedman had capitalist ideas about school choice. The emergence of the free school system stemmed from the liberal approach. The school choice program expanded and developed in 1980. The concept is influenced by the industry and corporate viewpoints.

School choice is the better way to ensure student engagement, according to previous scholars. From the review of previous studies, it was observed that a school choice is a good option for the students in several ways. The school choice helps increase parental satisfaction and involvement. The choice of schools also helps the students to identify the school that can meet their needs. The curriculum is need-based, customized, and student-centric. The school choice has also become a great option for the students from low-income groups. However, previous literature has not claimed whether the school choice reduces the dropout rate and results in a higher graduation rate. It was also found in the previous studies that the school choices put pressure on the schools to perform better and keep the consistency in their performance.

In a nutshell, several benefits of school choice have been observed in previous studies. The school choice movement has always been connected to the political, social, economic and cultural factors of America. Having its close association with racism, school choice has always been a disputed matter in the United States.

In the next section of the chapter, the discussion will further be carried out regarding the establishment of cyber schools in the state of PA.

### **Creation of Cyber Charter Schools**

#### Definitions

Prior to the discussion on creating cyber schools, the concept of cyber schools needs to be understood. During the 2020-2021 school year there are 15 cyber charter schools in the State of Pennsylvania. Different scholars have defined cyber charter schools. The definitions are as follows:

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year of Publication</b>	<b>Journal Names</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
<b>Waters, Barbour, &amp; Menchaca</b>	2014	The Nature of Online Charter Schools: Evolution and Emerging Concerns	Cyber charter schools are full-time K-12 public schools that combine online learning with traditional home-based practices in which technology plays a central role in the delivery and management of teaching and learning
<b>Hasler Waters &amp; Leong</b>	2014	Who is Teaching? New Roles for Teachers and Parents in Cyber Charter Schools	Cyber Charter schools are those which are funded and governed by charter school laws within the states, which afford them some flexibility in the way they operate
<b>Gill et al.</b>	2015	Inside Online Charter Schools. A Report of the National Study of Online Charter Schools	They typically provide students with computers, software, and network-based resources, while also providing access to teachers via email, telephone, web, and teleconference

The above definitions of cyber charter schools explain the following characteristics:

The learning in a cyber charter school is a blend of the online and traditional system

They are governed and funded by charter school laws.

Email, telephone, web are the means of teaching in cyber charter schools

### **Objective of Charter Schools**

Charter schools aim at providing new opportunities to involve almost all stakeholders in the student learning process. These stakeholders include teachers, parents, students, and community members who establish and maintain schools that are independent of the existing school structure. The key objectives of these schools are:

To improve student learning

To increase opportunities for all students (without segregation and discrimination)

To utilize innovative teaching methods

To create novel opportunities for the teachers

To open choices and alternatives to the students and the parents.

To ensure academic standard and quality

Although the cyber charter schools are exempted from several school mandates, they have to follow some necessary directives such as children's health and safety, civil rights, special education, and student accountability (*What is A Charter School?* n.d.). In 1997, Pennsylvania passed its charter school law. The bill established the state's requirements for charter school creation and explained some of the differences and similarities between charters and traditional public schools. The bill also set forth the state's responsibilities towards charter schools, including funding and transportation requirements. The first cyber charter school in Pennsylvania, PA Cyber Charter School was created in 2010.

The students are attracted to cyber charter schools for various reasons. Some students may find it difficult to cope with the traditional model of education due to many reasons such as physical disability, their frequent participation in local, national and international level sports and tournaments etc. Cyber charter schools are also a boon for gifted children or children with learning disabilities. Sometimes, safety issues are also involved in sending the children to school. There are high chances of drop-out in traditional schools. Some of the parents are not satisfied with the traditional way of teaching-learning methods. Such parents and children are likely to opt for cyber charter education (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark 2009). The advancement in digital technology has opened several options to the students who do not want to attend traditional schools for any reason.

### **Role of Parents and Teachers**

It is interesting to know the Cyber Charter School PA's overall operation, especially the role of the teachers and parents to facilitate the learning process and student engagement. Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark (2009) state that teachers with strong qualifications and state certification in their area of specialization are hired in

cyber charter schools. Archambault and Larson (2015) have discussed some qualities of online teachers. These qualities are strong communication skills, organized and prepared, highly knowledgeable and experienced, flexible, motivated, caring, patient, creative and adaptable, skilled in technology usage, and accessible and punctual.

Archambault and Larson (2015) state that the communication skills of the teachers should be in an online context. They should be well-versed in communicating via digital modes such as phone, emails, and video conferencing. These teachers should also have strong ethical values such as accountability, integrity, commitment etc.

Multi-tasking is also expected from the online teachers of cyber charter schools.

Self-motivation, disciplined, ambitious, proactive, driven, determined, and persistence are also the essential attributes of the teachers.

Cyber Charter Schools are governed under Pennsylvania's Charter School Law (CSL), 24 P.S. §§ 17-170-A-17-1751-A. The purposes behind enacting CSL (*Charter Schools, n.d.*) are:

To improve student learning

To open a new avenue of learning for the students

To encourage and motivate to use innovative methods in the teaching and learning process.

To attain teachers' development through creating new opportunities.

To provide the students and the parent's opportunities and expanded choices

To ensure that the academic standards are maintained.

In short, it is an attempt to make the cyber charter schools the "laboratories of innovations" (*Charter Schools, n.d.*).

### **Parent-Teacher collaboration in Cyber Charter Schools**

As mentioned above, cyber charter schools are different from traditional school functioning. The teacher's role is also different as he/she is not the only provider of instructions. They are the guides, mentors of the students, but they cannot perform the task of guiding the students without the help of the parents. So, collaborative work between students and parents is expected in public charter schools (Gill et al., 2015). The students have yet to develop the cognitive skills, and hence, they need adult supervision in their learning process especially, to keep the students motivated (Cavanaugh, Barbour, Clark, 2009). That is why cyber charter schools rely on parental support. In these schools, the parents' role is more complex. They are the learning coaches of the children, and they have the accountability of supporting students' learning. Most cyber charter schools expect parents' active role and participation in the teaching and learning process.

In a cyber charter school, the student is assigned a teacher just like they are assigned any home-teachers in a traditional way of learning. The assigned teacher is the content expert and works in collaboration with the coach. He/she explains the expectations, required technologies, shares the learning strategies with the coach and monitors the child's progress. Gill et al. (2015) explain the parents' crucial role in the learning process. They participate in various phases of learning such as students' instructions, monitoring progress, verifying seat time and attending parent-training sessions arranged periodically. Such parent-teacher collaboration is possible only

when the parents are highly responsible and well informed. Their level of involvement and commitment also needs to be high. If the parents lack these qualities, it may be challenging for the students and the teachers that may experience frustration. Lack of collaboration of defects in either side may affect the entire learning process, according to Litke (1998). Gill et al. (2015) produced the following chart to explain the current status of parents' tendency to participate in several learning activities (see fig. 1).

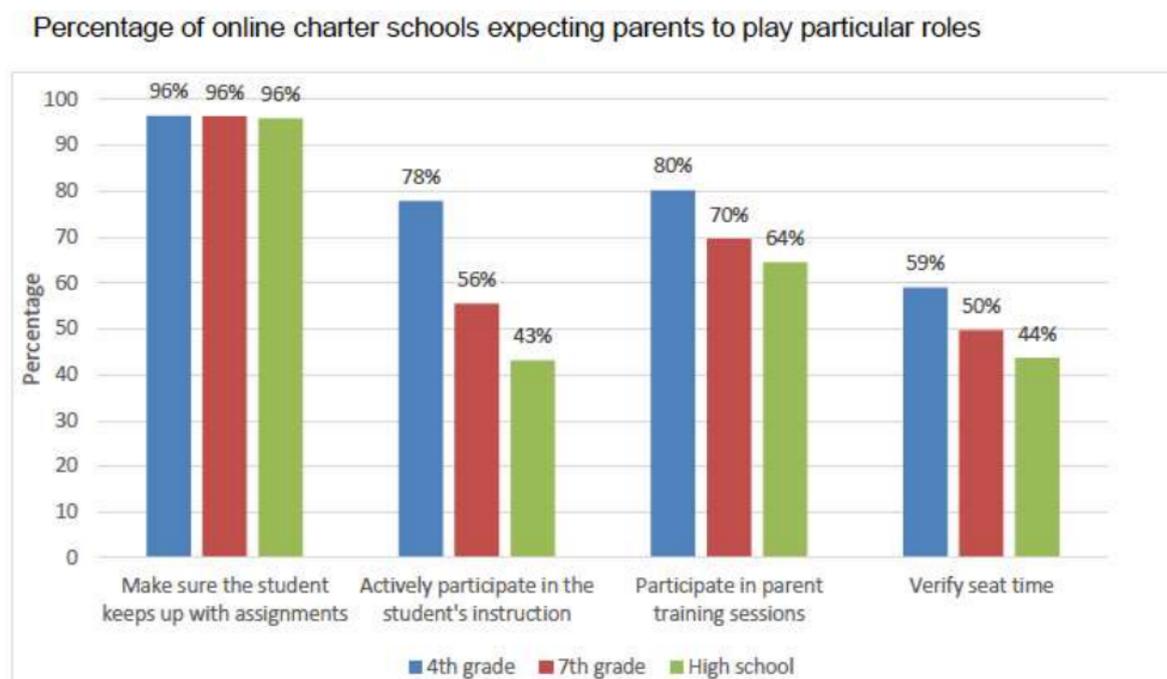


Fig. 1: Percentage of parents in different roles during the learning process (Gill et al., 2015)

The coaches play the role of a manager in cyber charter schools. Their principal responsibility consists of organizing working systems and ensuring a supportive learning environment for the students. The academic coach also sets academic expectations for the students and helps the student responsible for fulfilling

them. However, the coaches face several challenges. Some families are not aware of their full commitment as a coach, and they need more training. When the parents are the coaches of their ward, the key challenge they face is that they cannot keep their roles as parents and coaches separate from each other. This barrier is natural and obvious, but with prior training, it can be minimized.

Waters and Leong (2014) conducted ethnographic research to study the collaborative roles of parents and teachers in cyber charter schools. It was qualitative research in which teachers, parents, and administrators participated. This research was a study of a cyber charter school in Hawaii. The participating teachers were certified with a wide experience of K-8 level. The parents were highly qualified with diverse cultural backgrounds. The study aimed at understanding the roles of parents and teachers in teaching students from cyber charter schools. The authors collected the data from semi-structured interviews, observations, and content analysis of the online programs. It was observed in the research that the parents and teachers have to perform the following roles (Waters and Leong, 2014):

Teachers play the roles of facilitators and experts

Parents play the roles of managers and guides.

The teachers, as the facilitators, have to play the role of the content developers. The parents heavily rely on them and perceive them as the experts. Sometimes, the subject matter is too complicated to comprehend. To understand such a complex content of the curriculum, the students and the parents need assistance from the teachers from time to time. The parents and the entire families of the students consider that the teachers have the thorough knowledge and skills required

to decode the complex content and make it easy and comprehensible for the students. The teachers are supposed to utilize technology fully and ensure constructive and fruitful interaction with the students and the parents and thus build a strong teacher-parent-student relationship.

### **Challenges in Cyber Charter School**

However, there are several challenges the teachers have to face in cyber charter schools. Hasler, Waters, & Leong (2014) explained them in their study. Sometimes, technology-based communication poses several challenges, and the teachers cannot satisfactorily interact with the students and parents on online or virtual platforms. Technological barriers are also observed while connecting with the students. Sometimes the teaching space is not shared properly with the parents (coaches). The teachers have no full control over the students and the parents. If any of them (teachers, parents, and students) fail to achieve their respective objectives, it hampers the entire teaching and learning process.

Hasler, Waters, & Leong (2014) also focused on the role of the parent as a learning coach and the challenges they faced during the process. The principal responsibility of the parents is to organize a working system to facilitate a learning environment for their students. It is also the important role of the coach to keep the young learners motivated and engage them in the learning process. The students may divert from the track. Hence, it is also the teacher's responsibility to keep the students on track. The parents need to ensure that their children develop self-directed and self-managed quality work skills (Hasler Waters and Leong (2014)).

## **Perceptions about Cyber Charter Schools**

The concept of a cyber charter school is based on online learning and teaching principles. An obvious question may arise regarding the effectiveness of online teaching and traditional classroom teaching. Many researchers and scholars have confirmed that online teaching and learning is as effective as traditional education. Cavanaugh (2004), for example, carried out a meta-analysis that includes a thorough review of the students' academic achievement through the online mode. There was no significant difference found between the academic achievement of the students from traditional schooling and cyber charter schooling. However, the findings regarding the effectiveness of online and regular schooling are not consistent in previous studies. For example, the study conducted by Molnar et al. (2015) confirmed that the students enrolled in cyber charter schools could not perform as well as the students enrolled in brick-and-mortar settings. Molnar et al.'s study assessed 400 schools. Among them, the data was procured from 285 schools. 41% said that cyber schools performed satisfactorily, and the remaining 59% said that the performance of cyber charter school students is not satisfactory and acceptable based on results of standardized testing.

In another study conducted by Means et al. (2009), the authors found that the students enrolled in the blended learning environment (face-to-face) and online perform better than the brick-and-mortar counterparts. However, unlike Molnar et al., the study of Means et al. included just five cases from the K-12 level.

Stanford University's Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) also conducted a study to comparatively analyze the academic performance of children from cyber charter schools and traditional schools. The research obtained the findings that the children from traditional schools performed

much better than the children from cyber charter schools (CREDO, 2011). Haughey and Muirhead (1999) point out the advantages of cyber school and the students' performance:

*Students who do well in online programs are motivated to learn. They are self-directed and self-disciplined. They are not disenchanted with school.... Successful online students are at their grade level. They read and write well.... Online students need to be independent learners. They should be curious and able to ask for help... They have or should have an interest in technology and good computer skills.*

Some previous researchers have discussed the impact of cyber charter schools on children's learning processes by applying some models. Joyce Epstein is among such researchers. Epstein developed the school-family-community partnership model. It is a student-centric model. There must be a collaboration between the parents, teachers, community, agencies and services.

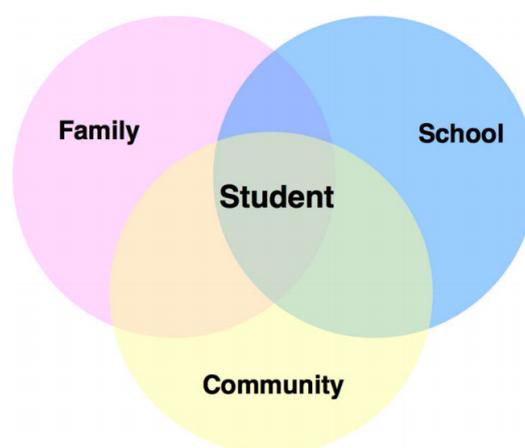


Fig. 2. School-Family-Community Partnership Model(Epstein et al., 2009)

The model indicates that the student is at the center while other elements, i.e., teachers, parents and community, are placed around them. The primary objectives of these entities are to engage the students, guide them, and motivate them to strive for their success. It is assumed that if the child feels encouraged and cared for, they make genuine efforts to read, write, calculate, and learn the required skills and knowledge. Each child's individuality is regarded, valued and treated specially (Epstein et al., 2009). Parents also strive to create a school-like family. Communities also work with the parents and teachers to impart education to the children and their overall development. There are some factors Joyce explained in this collaborative work and partnership. These challenges are common in cyber schools. First is the partnership, and collaboration is not consistent and tends to decline once the child enters the upper grades. That is why it is essential to make intentional efforts to develop and sustain the partnership in every grade. There is also a problem with the student raised by the single parent, who is usually employed. The parent has to remain out of the house due to employment commitments. Another parent is not physically available. In such circumstances, the school needs to think of other alternatives. According to Epstein, there are six types of school-home or teacher-parent relationships which lead the children towards academic excellence. These are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community.

When considering achievement, a previous study has indicated "virtual schools are indistinguishable from brick and mortar" (Cavanaugh et al. 2004). Academic wherewithal of the two settings may vary however, imperceptibly. A piece from 2009 found online education has a slight advantage in effectiveness over face-to-face instruction (Kingsbury, 2021). Yet, interpretation should be cautious as

“in many of the studies showing an advantage for online learning, the online and classroom conditions differed in terms of time spent, curriculum and pedagogy...the studies in this meta-analysis do not demonstrate that online learning is superior as a medium.” (Means et al. 2009, XVII). Studies considering the academic effectiveness between the two settings demonstrates reciprocal cancellation of superior successfulness overall. More time and targeted research honing in on specific growth points in the future may work to clarify the difference.

### **Summary of the section**

In this section, the researcher focused on the PA cyber schools. The term is defined in several ways by the scholar. These definitions were reviewed. The definitions summarized the qualities of the cyber schools, such as blending online and traditional education, charter law-governed, and online means of communication. The roles of teachers and parents are indeed crucial in teaching the students. The scholars discussed these roles and the challenges. They were reviewed thoroughly with the help of the previous studies. The ultimate objectives of cyber schools are to improve students' learning, open new opportunities for them, encourage the innovative approach of teachers, parents and students and attain teachers' development. In the next session of the chapter, the focus will be on the school choice experience of the parents of students with disabilities.

## **Parents' perspectives on online education for students with disabilities and bullying/harassment**

### Parents' perspectives

The students take online education from traditional public schools, private schools, homeschools and charter schools. Therefore, it is imperative to study parents' experiences and perspectives on cyber education. According to Evergreen Education Group (2015), students in cyber charter schools attend six to fourteen classes online weekly. As discussed earlier in the literature review, the parents' role is crucial in cyber charter online schools. The growing popularity of cyber charter schools has several reasons. The primary reason is that the parents gain flexibility and the online or cyber format of school perfectly matches their child's learning style, ensuring children a safer environment. They also get an opportunity to be involved in their children's school activities (Beck, Egalite, & Maranto, 2014; Werrell, 2014). It is mandatory for the cyber charter schools to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Cyber education is comparatively a new concept as compared to traditional brick and mortar schools. Therefore, it is imperative for the parents to be aware of the issues that may arise while making their children's learning process on the virtual platform. Their own experience is different, so they cannot apply it while navigating their children's educational process. That is why it is essential for the parents to get used to the virtual environment. The parents of children with disabilities have legal measures available by federal laws. Specifically, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004).

**Virtual schools: Potential advantages and disadvantages**

The U.S. Department of Education (2012) has enlisted some major benefits of virtual schooling that has been the backbone of cyber charter schools. These benefits are as follows:

Broadening access

Engaging students in active learning

Customized instructions on an individual level

Personalized and need-based instructions

Proper utilization of student and teacher time

Increasing the rate of students' learning

Making the learning process cost-effective

Reducing facility and salary cost

Understanding the opportunities for economies of scale

The students with special needs and disabilities especially avail privilege from many of the benefits mentioned above. They need individual attention to personalized and need-based training is a great opportunity for them to learn in an easy and secure environment. Such personalized learning encourages them and enhances their inclination towards the learning process. Online schools also provide them a new

avenue for interacting with their peers. Cyber schools provide opportunities for students with disabilities to control their learning and multimodal content. The virtual platform facilitates social interaction via several options and alternatives. Online education mode also helps the students minimize the distraction and conflicts that arise during the learning process. Cyber education is a boon, especially in a rural area and the area where the staff-shortage problem is prevalent. Cyber education also helps to overcome the stigma of being in separate school settings due to their disabilities.

Suppose parents' approach and perspective towards cyber education is supportive. It helps make the learning and teaching process easy and comfortable for the children (both general and children with disabilities). Parents need to play the role of a learning coach. Parents of children with disabilities from cyber charter schools are proactive and remain present with their children. It is motivating and encouraging for children with a special need. The feeling itself motivates that they are being cared for and provided a healthy environment for their studies. In the study of Beck, Egalite, and Maranto (2014), a survey of 232 parents and 269 students was carried out. In the survey, the authors observed that special education students and their parents are more satisfied overall in the cyber charter school than their peers with special needs in general schools. During this survey, one of the students with special needs commented on cyber education, especially on the teacher. It was indeed a positive comment in which the students stated that the teacher was always in contact with the student and his/her mother via mail and phone. She was monitoring the student's work. The teacher was always there when the student needed her help. She worked with the students throughout the year to get good grades. The high school special education teacher called the student and arranged special classes for reading and math. The

student liked her approach because she is always there to support him/her. The student further states,

*I always struggled at school. I was in title 1 math and reading since 3rd grade. Middle school was too hard. I was having a hard time keeping up with the daily work and couldn't read as fast as most other kids. I was considered the class clown, and most of the teachers would not listen when I said I couldn't get it. My mom got me tutors, and I did ok at home studying and with the tutors but not in school. My mom fought the school district to get me on all-day learning support; we even went to court. When she showed them the 3 diff testing she had done with diff doctors, the judge pushed me to be all day. Then nobody treated me good. I think the school was mad because my mom would not stop fighting them about my issues. We started looking at charter schools, and my mom took us the 3-hour trip to meet with them. She likes them the best for special ed and stuff.*

The cyber charter students and their parents are happy and satisfied with cyber schools because it has a flexible schedule and diminutive bullying experiences (Egalite, and Maranto, 2014). Like the students, the parents of the children with disabilities were not satisfied with the previous schools. According to them, their children's special needs were not served in their previous schools, which was the major reason behind choosing cyber charter schools. The authors received comments from many parents stating that cyber charter schools are very flexible. They agreed that their children did not get such flexibility in their previous school. They complained that the students did not receive grace for tests and homework. The parents contacted the school teachers several times and appealed to them to address

their children's issues with special needs. Learning in a structured brick and mortar environment was frustrating for them, and they would come home unmotivated. The parents stated that they did not have any such concern after joining the cyber charter school (Egalite and Maranto, 2014).

One of the parents says that now she can take accountability and her son focuses on learning. The parents also say that it is now possible for their students to take a break, get up, walk around and relax. In the virtual environment, no teachers or peers ever get annoyed due to the child's fidgeting. If some part of the teaching is missed out, he can see the video later.

The parents also expressed their satisfaction with the teachers. They stated that the teachers take genuine efforts to make the virtual environment interesting and engaging. Egalite and Maranto (2014) quote the response obtained from one of the parents:

*"The encouragement at the [traditional] public schools was too much of a 'push' to go to college, or failure was your only other option, which really disappointed me as a parent. There was no talk of Trade Schools or Technical Schools to further your career, only colleges."*

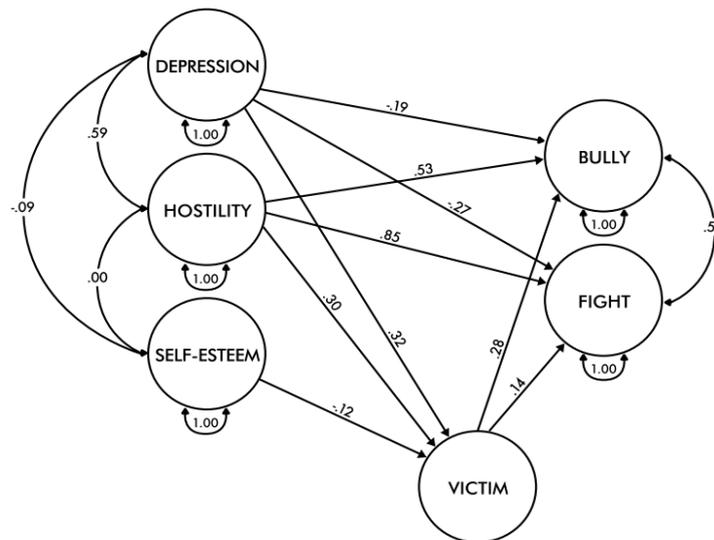
The parents are also keen to prefer cyber charter schools to avoid bullying and harassment that happens two-way. Sometimes the students with disabilities are victims. Their peers bully them, and sometimes they bully other students. Both (being victim and perpetrator) are harmful to their career growth. The parents are also concerned about this issue. Prior to understanding the parents' perspective towards bullying, it is essential to focus on bullying and harassment.

## Bullying and Harassment

Bullying is not just physical or face-to-face. It can happen with the students on the virtual platform as well. It is extremely harmful to the students, according to the research (Ghamrawi and Al-Jammal 2013). Taking support from previous studies, the authors state that parents and teachers have limited knowledge about cyberbullying. As a result, the impact of cyberbullying becomes even more adverse. Such bullying gives the victims a very negative experience, who find themselves helpless and without any adult support.

Digital technology is a boon; however, in some circumstances, it can be a bane. Normal children can be victimized and bullied on the virtual platform. In the case of children with physical and mental disabilities, the chances of cyberbullying are even higher. Beckman, Hellstrom and Kobiletzki (2020) studied cyberbullying among children with neurodevelopmental disorders (ND). According to the authors, children with (ND) tend to get involved in cyberbullying.

When the students are involved in bullying anyone, it is essential to know the psychology behind such violent and negative behavior. Rose, Simpson, and Preast (2016) reviewed the psychological predictors of bullying involvement of children with disabilities. The authors stated that the students being victimized tend to develop psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and hostility, and such victims with disabilities tend to follow the path of bullying, fighting and other kinds of aggressive behavior. To explain the correlation between psychological outcome and bullying tendency, the authors developed the following model.



Source: Rose, Simpson, and Preast (2016)

To protect the students from cyberbullying, the teachers and parents need special training, according to Begotti, Tirassa, and Maran (2018). The authors conducted a study of two training programs, Italian and Greek teachers' training programs. According to the authors, the trainees will be the teachers in the future and have to deal with numerous bullying cases (both offline and online bullying). Referring to previous studies, the authors suggested that the training should include videos, role plays and other sophisticated techniques to handle such situations with appropriate strategies. Such training should also highlight the teachers' role in stopping such a phenomenon and protecting the students from bullying others or getting victimized by the bullying. According to the authors, such training would help the students who are potentially vulnerable to such cyber-attacks and bullying, especially in the case of children with Special Education Need (SEN). The appropriate training would help the teachers to manage and intervene effectively against bullying by disrupting the chain of victimization. Ortiz-Bush and Lee (2018) also emphasize bullying education to the educators and teachers teaching students

with disabilities. However, the authors found that the teachers and educators received limited training during their service. The workshops or training programs will help the special education teachers to build their confidence. Supported by the previous studies (e.g., Bradshaw, 2013), the authors recommend that the training programs be comprehensive and continuous. All school personnel (including teaching and non-teaching staff) should be included in bullying prevention and intervention training programs. The training will help the school personnel to build a culture of anti-violence and inclusiveness. Schools must comply with bullying-related laws and policies. These policies should be accessible for school personnel (Ortiz-Bush and Lee, 2018). The appropriate training will help the teachers and educators become immersed in the new pedagogy (Vuorinen, Erikivi, and Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2019).

In a study by Blood et al. (2010), the authors focused on the intervention and appropriate school authorities' actions to stop all kinds of bullying. The authorities must be well familiar with the issue. A passive approach without any action can convey a wrong and negative message to the students. The trust in the authorities in the minds of the students must be developed. They should have confidence that their complaints of bullying are taken seriously by the authorities. The researchers also expressed the need for open dialogues between students, teachers and parents. Such dialogues can be established in cyber charter schools where the students, teachers and parents work together. Such interaction and discussion on cyberbullying will ensure a safe learning environment for both general and special education students / students with and without disabilities. Blood et al.'s study's major limitation is that it is generic and not focused on cyber-bullying. The study is also carried in the context of all students.

According to Ofe et al. (2016), bully-victims are bullied children, and then they become aggressors. This needs to be researched because there is a close connection between physical bullying and the impact on the virtual behavior of the victims being significant. When the child is physically bullied at school, he/she is likely to go home and involve himself/herself in cyberbullying activities and thus displace his aggression. The victims of bullying may go through severe psychological trauma that leads to substantial physical and psychological damage such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, hopelessness, helplessness, isolation, poor interpersonal skills, and low self-esteem (Ofe et al., 2016). These children feel unsafe in school. The authors also point out that the incidents of bullying are so subtle that they cannot be noticed many times by the parents or other adult members. In this circumstance, the teachers' and parents' attitude is also crucial. Teachers and parents have a vital role to play in controlling bullying both in the classroom and on virtual platforms.

Ofe et al.'s study focused on students with ASD. In their study, it was confirmed that bullying of students with ASD is a major issue and concern for adults. The participants in the study of Ofe et al. stated that students with ASD are bullied usually in the lunchroom or car line before or after school. These locations or places are easy to be bullied as there is a minimum or no supervision of adults at these locations. These research findings highlighted the need for adults' presence (either teachers, parents, guardians or any staff members). Verbal or relational are the common forms of bullying the students with ASD. Though anti-bullying programs exist in schools, they seldom address children with a special need. The authors recommended a strong, effective, and proactive program to cope with the bullying of children with special needs and ASD. The study carried out by Rose et al. (2015) is consistent with the study of Ofe et al. (2016). Rose et al. (2015) also focused on

students with ASD and their victimization. The authors found that these victimized students with disabilities demonstrate aggressive and fighting behavior. These students further engage in fighting more frequently as compared to their peers without disabilities. The authors' study confirms that students with SLD and ASD experience a higher victimization rate in inclusive settings, whereas students with ID and EBD experience victimization in restrictive settings. It is the responsibility of the school to incorporate intervention and skill development programs such as social skills and communication skills (Rose et al., 2015).

When we discuss the victimization and bullying issues, it is essential to consider the perpetrators or the culprits. When it is related to the school children, most of the time, the peers are the perpetrators. They tend to bully children with special needs and disabilities. Redmond (2011) conducted research to examine the victimization of students with specific language impairment (SLI), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and typical development. The author observed that peer-victimization takes place due to the lower level of contact with friends. The children with ADHD are more vulnerable to the risk such as friendlessness or limited or no contacts with their peers. This finding was based on the information provided by the parents of the children with ADHD. The types of bullying, such as physical and verbal bullying, are prominently present among the children with SLI and ADHD.

The study of Rose, Aragon and Elliott (2011) is consistent with the other studies reviewed in this section. The authors examined the victimization among students in special education and general education. They found that the students enrolled in special education are more vulnerable to bullying or victimization than the students in the general education curriculum. While remaining consistent with the

international studies, the author confirmed that the students with disabilities demonstrate more bullying and aggressive behavior than the students without disabilities. The students with disabilities have less capacity to deal with bullying. They respond to harassment with fighting and violent behavior. The authors further mentioned that there is no significant difference between girls and boys with disabilities. The authors explain the primary reason for the higher bullying rate among students with disabilities is that they lack the skills that are appropriate to their age. As a result, they cannot maintain a relationship with peers. Such unstable and unhealthy relationships with peers leads them towards victimization. The peers of the students with disabilities perceive that they are dependent on teachers, and without their assistance, they cannot do anything. This feeling among the peers develops social rejection towards the disabled students. Wells et al. (2018) focused on online harassment from the peers for which these peers use cell phones, the internet and social media. The students are involved in online harassment, demonstrate aggressive behavior, and engage in delinquency. They are also at a high risk of substance use. The study also examined that the rate and frequency of victimization are different in every school. The authors strongly feel that the schools should be proactive while addressing the harassment. The atmosphere in the school should not be conducive to any such kind of bullying and victimization (Rose, C., Aragon, S., and Elliott, J. (2011). The study of Swearer et al. (2012) also carried out the research in the same area as Rose Argon and Elliott. According to Swearer et al. (2012), educators need to consider the potential risks of bullying. Like other studies from this section of the literature review, Swearer et al. also confirmed that the students enrolled in special education are at a higher risk of bullying others and being bullied.

According to the parents, students with disabilities are motivated to learn online to escape from bullying (Beck, Eaglite, & Maranto (2014). Wells et al. (2018) confirmed that youths with disabilities are likely to get victimized by online and in-person bullying. The authors also point out that some of the parents of children with disabilities are proactive and extremely supportive. In such a situation, the chances of being victimized by these students are less. With the physical presence of the parents in school, activities help to minimize victimization and bullying (Wells et al. 2018).

### **Summary of the Chapter**

The present chapter carried out a thorough review of previous studies. The definitions of cyber schools were described. The parents' perspectives and their roles, impact of cyber schools were also discussed. Children with disabilities usually are vulnerable to classroom and cyber bullying. It was one of the concerning issues especially for students with disabilities. Hence, the researcher also focused the issue by reviewing previous literature.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Research Methodology**

The aim of the research is to review virtual/cyber schools in the state of Pennsylvania. Our focus is on the review of the New Castle Area District in Pennsylvania. The objectives of research are to focus on the history of charter schools in the U.S., to review parents' role and the policies related to parental involvement, bullying policies of cyber charter schools and the effectiveness of virtual education.

Specifically, the research questions for this investigation include:

How effective are virtual/cyber schools for children with disabilities?

What are the roles of the parents and teachers in virtual/cyber schools?

Are virtual/cyber-schools better options for children with disabilities?

What is the situation of virtual/cyber schools during the recent pandemic?

This chapter will discuss the proposed research design, potential participants, instrumentation, and procedures.

#### **Design**

This study was based on multiple measures in an effort to shed light on parental perspective on the efficacy of instructional setting. In aims to address the research question specifically within the New Castle Area School District, a detailed survey was curated. Herein presents information pertaining to the participants,

instrumentation, and procedures engaged with the survey. The culmination is a data analysis demonstrating parental outlook of effectiveness across instructional settings.

### **Participants**

The participants in the survey are parents having one or more student(s) identified and receiving special services in grades k-12 of the New Castle Area School District. The student(s) are enrolled in a variety of learning environments including cyber school, virtual school, and traditional school. The cyber school is operated by a third party while the virtual school is operated by the New Castle Area School District. The New Castle Area School District has offered the cyber school option prior to pandemic, however, virtual setting is in its infancy given rise to from the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Setting**

New Castle Area School District is in New Castle, PA the county seat of Lawrence County. The district is home to 548 students receiving special services inside the district. The district also oversees the education of 30 special education students placed outside the district as well as 38 students in the Lawrence County Career and Technical Center. Within the department, instruction is provided by a 100% highly-qualified teaching staff. The district currently has 38 special education teachers including speech therapists. The district also employs 60 paraprofessionals that are deemed highly qualified due to possessing a two year degree or passing a state assessment. The following special services enrollment information, obtained for New Castle Area School District from the school year on the Pennsylvania Department of Education School Performance Profile website, described the subset accordingly:

Total special services student enrollment –

- Lockley Primary Center (Kindergarten - Grade 2) – 140 special services students
- George Washington Intermediate School (Grades 3 - 5) – 143 special services students
- New Castle Junior High (Grades 6 - 8) – 139 special services students
- New Castle Senior High School (Grades 9 - 12) – 126 special services students

Special Services Enrollment by Ethnicity

- White – 59.8%
- Black or African-American – 21.7%
- Multi-Racial – 13.6%
- Hispanic – 4.6%
- Asian – n/a
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander - n/a

Special Services Enrollment by Student Groups

- Economically Disadvantaged – 64%
- English Language Learner – .05%
- Special Education – 18.7%

Special Services Enrollment by Gender

- Male – 62%
- Female – 38%

## **Instrumentation**

The investigation entailed an electronic survey. The survey created via Google Forms in the district's Google for Education G-suite elicited responses via a form submission. An array of questions utilizing various response types including, yes/no, multiple-choice, short-answer, and open-ended. Parents/guardians were directed to submit one response per child in the household currently identified and receiving special services. A break down of the research questions and the survey items that address each research question are outlined accordingly:

How effective are virtual/cyber schools for children with disabilities?

The survey addresses this specific research question as follows:

Has your child's academic progress improved in cyber/virtual school?

Has the cyber/virtual school been successful in meeting your child's educational needs as outlined in the IEP?

What are the roles of the parents and teachers in virtual/cyber schools?

Survey questions:

What is your parent role in cyber/virtual school?

How does your role as parent in a cyber/virtual school compare to traditional school?

What is the role of the teacher in the cyber/virtual school?

How does the cyber/virtual teacher role compare from traditional school?

Are virtual/cyber-schools' better options for children with disabilities?

Survey questions:

Has the cyber/virtual school improved your child's outlook on school?

Has the cyber/virtual school been successful in addressing your child's social emotional needs?

What is the situation of virtual/cyber schools during the recent pandemic?

Survey questions:

If the cyber/virtual school through the district is no longer offered will you seek to find an alternate cyber/virtual school option?

### **Procedures**

YSU IRB provided approval to use the data from the proposed survey for the purposes of this investigation. The survey was sent by the school district personnel and delivered to all parents/guardians of special services population through certified district email. Parents/guardians were directed to submit one response per child in the household currently identified and receiving special services. Recipients had a clearly identified window of time to submit responses, two follow-up reminders were sent out within the timeframe and prior to the response deadline.

### **Validity and Reliability Concerns**

The survey elicited input from the entirety of the district's special services population in an effort to eliminate any concerns about selection bias. Researcher bias could be a concern, as the researcher is the director of special services for the district in which the study is taking place. The survey varied response tools, specifically the short-answer and open-ended response collection to prevent

researcher (director of special services) personal bias from skewing and mitigate any researcher influence.

### **Proposed Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data gathered from the survey. The aggregation of demographic variables such as ethnicity and gender were provided in an effort to establish the representativeness of the sample of participants. Analysis via response organizer tools in Google Forms and G-suite platform compartmentalized responses. Interpreted results are presented in multi form as frequency charts, tables and graphs.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The aim of the research is to get insight from parent experiences during the virtual learning platform all students participated in during the 20-21 school year. The participants in the survey are parents having one or more student(s) identified and receiving special services in grades k-12 of the New Castle Area School District. The student(s) are enrolled in a variety of learning environments including cyber school, virtual school, and traditional school. The cyber school is operated by a third party while the virtual school is operated by the New Castle Area School District. The New Castle Area School District has offered the cyber school option before the pandemic, however, the virtual setting is in its infancy given rise to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey was administered online using a Google form by the school district. The survey tool is included in Appendix A. An array of questions utilizing various response types including, yes/no, multiple-choice, short-answer, and open-ended were included in the survey. This data was recorded online using a Google form. A second data collection includes interviewing six parents to get a deeper understanding of their experience with cyber/virtual learning. The research questions guiding the data collection includes:

1. How effective is the virtual/cyber school for children with disabilities?
2. What are the roles of the parents and teachers in the virtual/cyber school?
3. Are virtual/cyber schools better options for children with disabilities?

#### 4. What is the situation of virtual/cyber schools during the recent pandemic?

This chapter presents the results of the descriptive analysis, followed by trends and interpretations of the research responses. The descriptive statistics regarding race are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Reported Race of Parent Respondents*

	N	%
Black	13	14.0%
Caucasian	68	73.1%
Hispanic	5	5.4%
No answer	7	7.5%

As indicated above, most responses were provided by parents identifying as Caucasian (73%) followed by Black (14%). This distribution is consistent with the parents from the district who are identified as Caucasian 59.8%, Black or African American 21.7%, Multi-racial 13.6%, and Hispanic 4.6%. All the survey questions were statistically analyzed by race. There were no differences in the responses to any item based on the race of the participant. Table 2 provides a breakdown of parent's reported gender.

**Table 2**

*Gender - Survey Participants*

	N	%
Male	20	21.5%
Female	69	74.2%
No answer	4	4.3%

Additionally, females participated in the survey at a much higher rate (74.2%) compared to males (21.5%). Complete participant data were available for 93 parents. The breakdown of each student's disability category per parent participant is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Disability Category (Participants Child)*

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Autism	11	11.8
	Emotional Support	10	10.8
	Intellectual Disability	1	1.1
	Learning Supports	36	38.7
	Multiple Disabilities	10	10.8
	Orthopedic	1	1.1
	Other	10	10.8
	Speech and Language	14	15.1
	Total	93	100.0

As indicated in Table 3, the highest percentage of participants came from families with a child with a specific learning disability (38.7%). The next highest participant subgroup was speech and language impairments (15.1%). Based on the district's enrollment of special education students, speech or language impairments make up (30.2%) of the students followed by specific learning disabilities at (27.2%). The grade level of the student based on the parent participant is broken down in Table 4.

**Table 4***Grade Level*

**Please select your  
child's current grade**

	N	%
K-2	22	23.7%
3-5	18	19.4%
6-8	26	28.0%
9-12	27	29.0%

	N	%
K-2	22	23.7%
3-5	18	19.4%
6-9	26	28.0%
9-12	27	29.0%

As indicated above, parents who have children in Grades 9-12 completed the survey at the highest rate (29%). Grades 3-5 had the lowest participant rate at (19.5%). The results of the current educational setting for students are outlined in Table 5.

**Table 5***Current Educational Setting of Students*

	N	%
Trad from Cyber	8	8.6%
Trad from Virtual	40	43.0%
Current Virtual	43	46.2%
Current Cyber	2	2.2%

As indicated in Table 5, 46.2 % of the students were still receiving their education in the virtual setting during the time of the survey. In comparison, 43% of the students

had returned to the traditional brick-and-mortar school. The breakdown of the participants' outlook on virtual programming is provided in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Outlook of school based on the virtual experience due to Covid 19*

	N	%
No	54	58.1%
Yes	23	24.7%
I don't know	16	17.2%

Based on the responses above, the virtual experience did not leave a positive outlook on the parents of students with disabilities (58.1%). Twenty-three respondents (24.7%) did respond that virtual programming did improve their child's outlook on school. A breakdown of participants who feel the virtual school has met their child's needs outlined in the IEP is provided in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Virtual school meeting the child's needs outlined in the IEP*

	N	%
No	36	38.7%
Yes	45	48.4%
I don't know	12	12.9%

As indicated in Table 7, the majority of the parents believed their child's needs via the IEP were being met in the virtual setting (48.4%). There were far too many that believed their child was not getting the education they were entitled to (38.7%). A breakdown of participants who feel their child has made academic progress in the virtual setting is provided in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Improvement of Academic Progress in the Virtual Setting*

	N	%
No	47	50.5%
Yes	35	37.6%
I don't know	11	11.8%

As indicated above, 47 parents do not believe that their child's academic progress has improved in the virtual setting (50.5%). Thirty-five parents responded they have seen some growth (37.6%). A breakdown of parents' feelings on if they assisted their child more in the virtual setting than in the traditional setting will be presented in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Parental assistance in the virtual setting*

	N	%
No	15	16.1%
Yes	75	80.6%
I don't know	3	3.2%

As indicated in Table 9, parents overwhelmingly feel they have to assist their child more in the virtual setting (80.6%). Parent satisfaction in comparison with the traditional school will be examined in Table 10.

**Table 10**

Parent Satisfaction of the Virtual Setting compared to traditional school

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Less Satisfied	46	49.5
	Equally Satisfied	40	43.0
	More Satisfied	4	4.3
	I have multiple c	1	1.1
	I think it is eas	1	1.1
	My child is doing	1	1.1
	Total	93	100.0

As indicated in Table 10, parents were less satisfied with virtual instruction in comparison to regular school (49.5%). Forty parents were equally satisfied (43%). Lastly, four parents felt virtual school is a better option than the traditional setting (4.3%). Table 11 will explore the effectiveness of virtual learning in addressing student needs.

**Table 11**

*Effectiveness in Addressing Academic Needs*

	N	%
Not Effective	26	28.0%
Somewhat Effective	50	53.8%
Fully Effective	12	12.9%
Don't know	5	5.4%

As indicated in Table 11, parents felt the virtual school was somewhat effective in addressing academic needs (53.8%). Twenty-six parents found the virtual school to not be effective in meeting the needs of their child (28%). Table 12 will review the role of the teacher in the virtual school.

**Table 12**

*Role of the Teacher*

	N	%
Assist Student	25	26.9%
Guide Learning	57	61.3%
Other	11	11.8%

The data indicates that parents felt their role was to guide learning (61.3%) this was followed by assisting in learning (26.9%). Table 13 will begin to analyze the role of the teacher in virtual school compared to brick and mortar.

**Table 13**

*Teacher Role in the virtual model compared to a traditional setting*

	N	%
Less	41	44.1%
Equally	34	36.6%
More	7	7.5%
Not Sure	11	11.8%

Table 13 indicates that parents feel the teacher's role is less involved in the virtual setting compared to the traditional (44.1%). Some parents felt the teachers were equally involved in their child's education (36.6%). Seven parents felt the virtual teacher was more involved (7.5%). Table 14 will examine the role of the parent in the virtual school.

**Table 14**

*Role of Parent in the Virtual School*

	N	%
Assist Student	72	77.4%
Guide Learning	16	17.2%
Not Sure	5	5.4%

Based on the results of Table 14, parents feel their role in virtual learning is to assist the child (77.4%). Only sixteen parents thought their role was to help guide the

learning process (17.2%). Table 15 will examine the parents' involvement in virtual learning compared to the traditional setting.

**Table 15**

*Parent involvement in virtual compared to traditional school*

	N	%
Less	6	6.5%
Equally	26	28.0%
More	58	62.4%
Not Sure	3	3.2%

As indicated in Table 15, parents feel they are more involved in the virtual school than the traditional setting (62.4%). Only six parents (6.5%) felt they were less involved during virtual learning. The breakdown of parents who feel their child's social and emotional needs were addressed in the virtual setting is addressed in Table 16.

**Table 16**

*Social Emotional Needs*

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	No	45	48.4
	Yes	17	18.3
	Somewhat	31	33.3
	Total	93	100.0

Table 16 indicates parents do not feel their child's social & emotional needs were addressed by school staff in the virtual setting (48.4%). Seventeen parents felt the school did provide some type of social and emotional program (18.3%). The breakdown of students who have experienced bullying in virtual schools will be reported in Table 17.

**Table 17**

*Experienced Bullying in the virtual school*

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	No	84	90.3
	I don't know	9	9.7
	Total	93	100.0

Table 17 indicates that parents did not feel their child was bullied in the virtual setting (90.3%). Nine parents did respond that they did not know (9.7%). No parents reported bullying on this survey. Table 18 will explore parent feelings for alternative schooling options in the future if the district does not offer the current virtual model.

**Table 18**

*Parents interested in virtual options moving forward*

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	No	83	89.2
	Yes	10	10.8
	Total	93	100.0

As indicated in Table 18, most parents are not interested in virtual schooling once the traditional schools are open (89.2%). Ten parents will explore options (10.8%)

### Research Question One

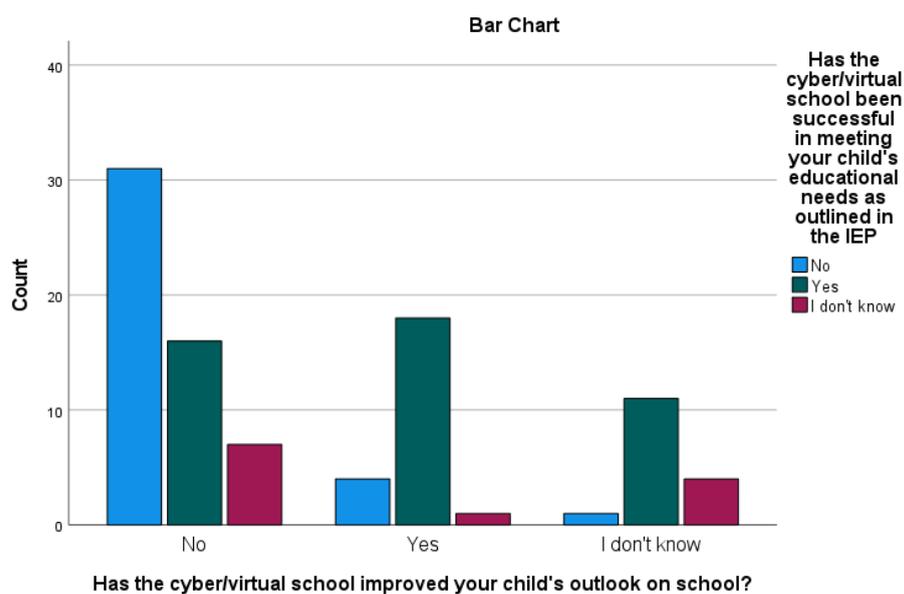
Research question one asks “How effective are virtual schools for children with disabilities?” Two items were used in addressing this question:

Has your child's academic progress improved in cyber/virtual school?

Has the cyber/virtual school been successful in meeting your child's educational needs as outlined in the IEP?

A Pearson's Chi-Square was used to assess the association between parents' responses to these two items. Results indicate a significant difference in their responses,  $\chi^2(4)=24.59, p<.001$ . This is represented graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Effectiveness of Cyber/Virtual Schools based on Parent Responses.



Illustrated in the cross-tabulations, district parents were more likely to have a negative response to the cyber/virtual setting meeting their child's educational needs while also responding negatively regarding their child's outlook on school being improved in the cyber/charter setting. A successful cyber/virtual model would have outcomes of positive perceptions from parents in meeting the students' academic needs.

### **Research Question Two**

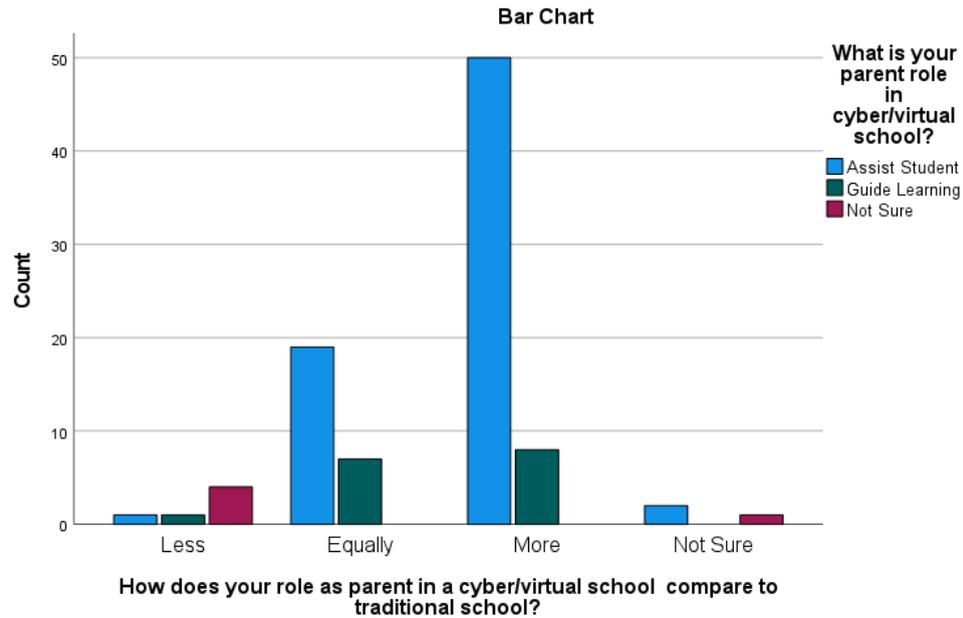
Research question two asks: What are the roles of the parents and teachers in cyber charter schools? For the first part of this question, two items were analyzed:

What is your parent role in cyber/virtual school?

And how does your role as a parent in a cyber/virtual school compare to a traditional school?

A Pearson' Chi-Square was used to assess the association between parents' responses to these two items. Results indicate a significant difference in their responses,  $\chi^2(6)=56.69, p<.001$ . This is represented graphically in Figure 2.

*Figure 2. Role of the parent in virtual school based on responses*



The responses regarding parent role in the cyber/virtual setting suggest they largely took on an assistive role. Likewise, the perception here suggests a direct correlation between the virtual setting with assistance provided is at an increased level.

### Research Question Three

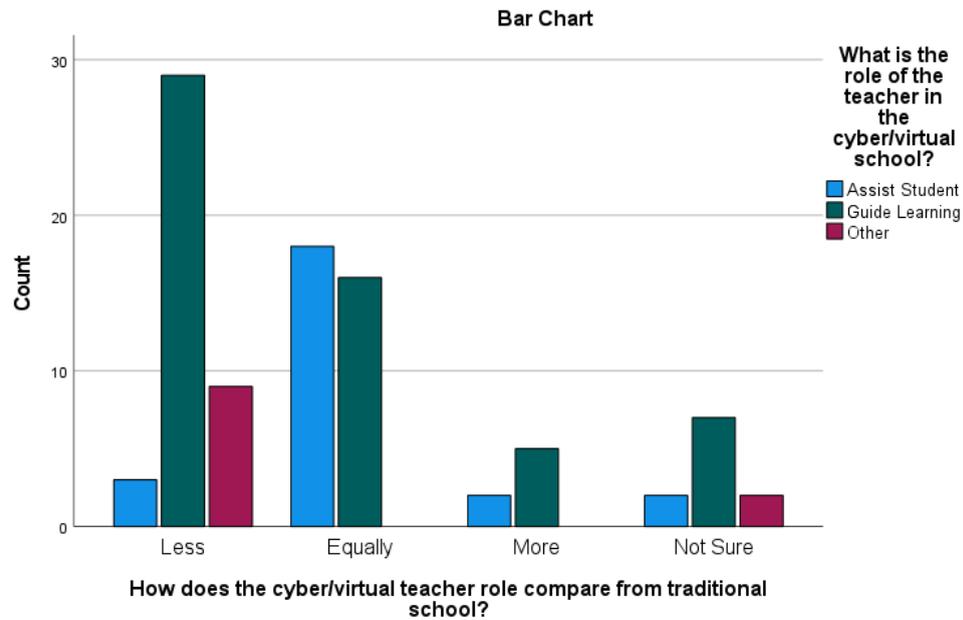
The second part of this question, the items were:

What is the role of the teacher in the cyber/virtual school?

And how does the cyber/virtual teacher role compare to the traditional school?

A Pearson's Chi-Square was used to assess the association between parents' responses to these two items. Results indicate a significant difference in their responses,  $\chi^2(6)=25.40, p<.001$ . This is represented graphically in Figure 3.

*Figure 3. Role of the teacher in virtual school based on parent responses*



Here we see the majority of respondents viewed the cyber/virtual teacher as a guide to student learning. Notably, we also see parents perceive the teacher as less effective in comparison to the traditional setting.

#### **Research Question Four**

Research Question Four asks: Are cyber-schools' better options for children with disabilities?

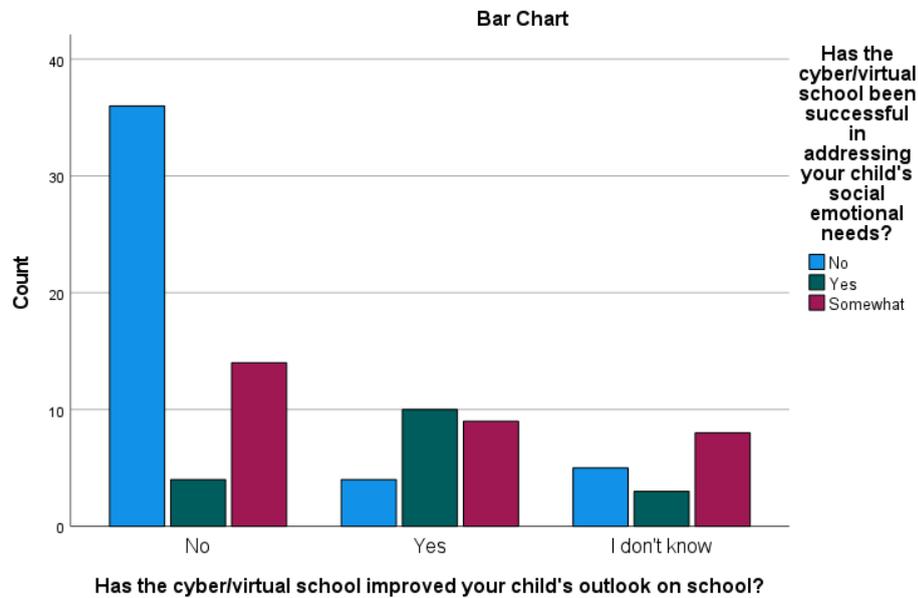
The items for this question include:

Has the cyber/virtual school improved your child's outlook on school?

And Has the cyber/virtual school been successful in addressing your child's social-emotional needs?

A Pearson' Chi-Square was used to assess the association between parents' responses to these two items. Results indicate a significant difference in their responses,  $\chi^2(6)=23.20, p<.001$ . This is represented graphically in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Improved outlook of education in the virtual school based on parent responses



Above illustrates the lack of cyber/virtual school settings in addressing student's social-emotional learning needs. This is in stark correlation to the noted overall lack of improvement in student outlook on school.

### Parent Interviews

To garner a more prolific understanding of parent perspectives, the researcher interviewed six parents to further delve into the virtual/cyber experience. The parents will be identified as Parent 1, Parent 2, Parent 3, Parent 4, Parent 5, Parent 6. The parents were asked the following questions:

1. How did the remote delivery of instruction work for your child this school year? Why?

2. If virtual instruction is offered next year will you have him/her remain at home? Why?

3. What was the biggest area of concern for your child in a virtual school setting?

The breakdown of the parents that participated in the interview were:

Race	Gender	Child's Disability	Grade
P 1-African American	F	Autism	3
P 2-African American	F	Emotional Disturbance	9
P 3-African American	F	Intellectual Disability	10
P 4-Caucasian	F	Emotional Disturbance	4
P 5-Caucasian	F	Orthopedic Impairment	9
P 6-Caucasian	F	Other Health Impairment	8

While demographic information about the interviewees had been provided, details are not included in the table for confidentiality purposes.

The following are details recorded from the interviews.

### **Theme 1: Communication**

Five parents drew attention to the crucial impact of communication between the teacher, student, and themselves. P 3 stated, "*Teachers were the key because they cared about my son, virtual went good because of the in-home environment where his teachers and TSS were able to prompt to keep him on track.*" One parent shed light on the struggle encountered when communication

was less than optimal. P 4 added, "*My son needs to talk with the teacher and have questions answered immediately, and that did not happen all the time.*"

## **Theme 2: Support Systems**

Parents that had outside commitments during the virtual day often relied on other family members and community agencies to be present and assist children when needed during the academic day. P 2 stated, "*It also worked because he had the support of a TSS worker in the home. Also, he had all of his core classes in the morning while the TSS was there*". Three interview subjects are parents of students with district-appointed one-on-one paraprofessionals charged with assisting the student (P 3,4,6). The paraprofessional role, supporting students in meeting their educational goals, remained unchanged in the virtual setting. Assistive technology such as connecting via Google meets during in-class sessions and on an as-needed basis was the hallmark of this support process. P 6 offered, "*I felt the one-on-one aide did most of the instruction. Once the work was done, I felt like we sat around too much and waited on the teacher for the next lesson*". P 2 and 3 had assistance via TSS services in the home to support their child during the virtual school day. In instances like this, support staff entered the home offering face-to-face assistance to the student. The role of the TSS was to ensure that the student engaged in their Google Meet instruction. The TSS workers are charged with redirecting and prompting the students to answer questions and complete assignments. The capacity of those working as TSS broadened the scope of the support explicitly offered for academics during the pandemic.

## **Theme 3: Parents New Role**

P 1 responded that "*Some of the teachers did not explain the material well.*" P 1 also stated, "*My daughter has a hard time following directions.*" Some respondents expressed that the workload was too much, frequently noting that it spilled over to nights. P 5 expressed the exhaustive effects of managing to work their job and have the energy and stamina to be a leader in their child's learning. Further commenting, they felt that providing leadership in the educational process was the teacher's role. P 4 stated, "*We would go home and try to review at night.*" Also stating, "*I wasn't' home to assist so it was difficult.*" P 5 responded, "*the only way we kept up is because my mother was home.*"

#### **Theme 4: Future School Choice**

Five parents stated their child would return to the traditional school setting at the beginning of the next school year, further stating that the cyber/virtual school setting is not a viable option. Those planning to send their children to brick-and-mortar school identified the social-emotional well-being of their children as a prime factor for this decision. The parents' concern for their child(ren) social-emotional wellbeing outweighed their concern for potential risks associated with Covid 19. P 3 mainly spoke to this "*We started to see some regression of social skills that we ultimately decided to send him back.*"

#### **Theme 5: Hurdles**

The concerns of the parents are essential to analyze for future educational decision-making. The public school system wants to keep parents happy, and their students attending and not migrating to cyber schools. P 1 stated her concerns were the following: *"She was getting on sites she was not supposed to and lack of supervision."* P 3 added, *"he was getting too comfortable being at home. He would try to play his Switch or Playstation during the school hours."* P 4 had the following concerns: *"It was difficult for him to see the board when the teacher would put information on it, he did not have the opportunity to ask questions, and it was tough to track down his teachers. Sometimes they were not in their virtual classes due to connectivity issues. He would get logged off and miss information."* P 5 stated, *"I feel one teacher was more equipped to handle the instruction and did the work in class. The other teacher relied on the parent too much. She sent home too much work, and my child felt frustrated. The only way we kept up is because my mother was home and able to assist him."*

**Summary:**

Chapter 4 highlighted parent interpretations and perspectives of the school settings across a cyber/virtual platform and a traditional brick and mortar setting. Survey results quantitatively summarized the feelings of parents and perceived outcomes and implications for school choice moving forward. While expected trends prevailed, specific outlying trends emerged, necessitating further inquiry.

The final step in the investigative process was a detailed interview of a diverse subset of survey participants. As respondents elicited deeper

introspection highlighted specific precipitous events and circumstances. Most notable in the findings are five themes, Communication, Support Systems, Parents New Role, Future School Choice, and Hurdles. The nexus and nuances between the quantitative findings and these emergent themes are examined in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

School choice has come to the forefront of education in recent years. In understanding the history of school choice, it is essential to know the historical background of the *Brown v. Board* decision that laid the foundation of school choice. A milestone decision as the Supreme Court ruled that segregating children on a racial basis is unconstitutional. Parents are looking for the best opportunity for their children to excel and meet their needs. Cyber and virtual programs are growing exponentially, putting pressure on the public school systems to adapt. Charter schools are the school of choice as it facilitates more options and opportunities for families. Thus, parents perceive it as a more flexible option than the traditional school patterns. Some of the benefits of cyber charter schools include high-quality interactive learning, the educational choice for the children, improved learning outcomes, and personalized instruction. Political leaders, most notably President George Bush, implore improvement of schools by adopting innovative choice approaches. In 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act* outlined further support of school choice.

Many students with special needs are enrolling in cyber/virtual programs at alarming rates. It is a more specific challenge for teachers and parents to address the expansive needs of students with disabilities and those under the special education umbrella. They can have intense behavioral, emotional, and communication disorders and learning deficiencies. Special education in the United States is regulated stringently by federal, state, and local laws. Under special education law, public schools must be adaptable to the needs of the specific child. Under the Individual with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), public schools cannot reject any students according to the 'zero reject' policy. Public districts lose state funding when students enroll in cyber schools. In the last year (2020), more than 14000 new students enrolled in PA cyber charter schools. The enrollment rose during the pandemic. Therefore, it is necessary to check whether there is any positive correlation between pandemic situations and the new trend of parents and teachers preferring cyber charter schools.

As highlighted throughout Chapter 2, there is no conclusive evidence that cyber schools improve students' academic performance and achievement. For example, the study conducted by Molnar et al. (2015) confirmed that the students enrolled in cyber charter schools could not perform as well as the students enrolled in brick-and-mortar settings. However, cyber/virtual schools can offer increased engagement from students and families. In the virtual setting, the communication system must be robust between the teacher/parent/student. Vaughn and Witko (2013) view school choice as a means to increase student engagement. The school choice is an opportunity for them to attend a school suitable to meet their needs. Lastly, cyberbullying was not significant in this study. There were no parents who reported incidents of bullying in the cyber/virtual setting.

The current investigation reviews the parents' perceptions of cyber/virtual schooling. Respondents shed light on their experience over the late 2019-2021 school years in this setting due to the COVID- 19 pandemic. Parent surveys and interview data demonstrate trends, outcomes, success, and shortcomings. The following is a summary of those results.

### **Research Question 1**

How effective is the virtual/cyber school for children with disabilities?

Survey results indicate that parents' perception of the virtual experience was not a favorable one. When interviewed, the dominant factor in perspective was the lack of adequately addressing student social-emotional needs. The information garnered is vital for public school administrators to process while planning for the 21-22 school year. Public schools must provide appropriate programming for addressing the shortcoming to eliminate the potential of losing students to competing cyber schools. Additionally, most parents did not feel the virtual program met their child's needs. Hence, revealing other pertinent areas for the district to remediate. As previously noted, all students must receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education. Some parents felt their children needed more intense attention and one-on-one time with educators based on interviews conducted.

## **Research Question 2**

What are the roles of the parents and teachers in virtual/cyber schools?

Results indicate that parents felt their students relied upon them, and they were more involved with virtual/cyber programming than the traditional setting. In some cases, this was a point of frustration. Respondents that were working parents reported exhaustion from having to come home to home to complete school work with their child. The parents viewed their role as an assistant in completing assignments.

As discussed earlier in the literature review, the parent's role is crucial in cyber charter online schools. The growing popularity of cyber charter schools has several reasons. The primary reason is that the parents gain flexibility and the online or cyber

format of school perfectly matches their child's learning style, ensuring children a safer environment. They also get an opportunity to be involved in their children's school activities (Beck, Egalite, & Maranto, 2014; Werrell, 2014). The students have yet to develop the cognitive skills, and hence, they need adult supervision in their learning process especially, to keep the students motivated (Cavanaugh, Barbour, Clark, 2009). That is why cyber charter schools rely on parental support.

Hasler, Waters, & Leong (2014) also focused on the role of the parent as a learning coach and the challenges they faced during the process. The principal responsibility of the parents is to organize a working system to facilitate a learning environment for their students. It is also the critical role of the coach to keep the young learners motivated and engage them in the learning process. The students may divert from the track. Hence, it is also the teacher's responsibility to keep the students on track. The parents need to ensure that their children develop self-directed and self-managed quality work skills (Hasler Waters and Leong (2014).

Based on the data gathered, parents felt teachers were less involved with their children in the virtual classroom. The perspective shared was of the teacher as a guide to learning in the cyber/virtual setting. As mentioned above, cyber charter schools are different from traditional school functioning. The teacher's role is also different as he/she is not the only provider of instructions. They are the guides, mentors of the students, but they cannot perform the task of guiding the students without the help of the parents. Therefore, collaborative work between students and parents has become an expectation in public charter schools (Gill et al., 2015).

The teachers, as the facilitators, have to play the role of the content developers. The parents heavily rely on them and perceive them as the experts. Sometimes, the subject matter is too complicated to comprehend. Understanding the

complex content within the curriculum, students and parents need assistance from the teachers from time to time. The parents and the student's entire families consider that the teachers have the thorough knowledge and skills required to decode the complex content and make it easy and comprehensible. The teachers are supposed to utilize technology fully and ensure constructive and fruitful interaction with the students and the parents and thus build a teacher-parent-student solid relationship.

### **Research Question 3**

Are virtual/cyber school's better options for children with disabilities?

The parents responded that the cyber/virtual experience had not improved their child's outlook on school. The parents also feel that the virtual program did not address the social and emotional needs of the students appropriately. The respondents failed to share the thoughts widely reported in other studies of the like, further shining light on an area of improvement of the district, a contrast to previously shared research.

Online schools also provide them a new avenue for interacting with their peers. Cyber schools provide opportunities for students with disabilities to control their learning and multimodal content. The virtual platform facilitates social interaction via several options and alternatives. Online education mode also helps the students minimize the distraction and conflicts that arise during the learning process. Cyber education is a boon, especially in rural areas and where the staff-shortage problem is prevalent. Cyber education also helps to overcome the stigma of being in separate school settings due to their disabilities.

### **Research Question 4**

What is the situation of virtual/cyber schools during the recent pandemic?

Results indicate that parents will not look for alternative cyber/virtual options next school year (89.3%). Parents want their children to return to the brick-and-mortar setting to receive face-to-face instruction and support. Consistent with other studies, the challenges are vast and challenging to overcome and allude particularly for systems in their infancy. However, there are several challenges the teachers have to face in cyber charter schools. Hasler, Waters, & Leong (2014) explained them in their study. Sometimes, technology-based communication poses several challenges, and the teachers cannot satisfactorily interact with the students and parents on online or virtual platforms. Technological barriers observed while connecting with the students. Sometimes the teaching space is not appropriately shared with the parents (coaches). The teachers have no complete control over the students and the parents. If any of them (teachers, parents, and students) fail to achieve their respective objectives, it hampers the entire teaching and learning process.

### **Limitations**

Here are potential limitations to this study. One is the large portion of female guardian respondents to this study and potentially skews the perceptions to an all-female point of view. The lack of equal male input may be impactful to overall perspectives. A 2008 study conducted by William G. Smith, draws attention to the common gender disparity prevalent amongst survey respondents. Additionally, the sample size could be a limitation—the study, conducted in a single large urban district. However, this urban district is representative of many urban districts that serve a diverse population of low income families. The inclusion of other diverse districts in the same situation could have further implications on trends and understandings.

Finally, time for the system to finetune the cyber/virtual setting. Due to the hurried implementation of the virtual setting necessitated by the pandemic, the district was very limited in time of planning. If adequate time were available for the planning before implementation, outcomes undoubtedly would be impacted.

### **Future research**

There are many valuable connotations to consider out of the research presented. Here entailed are the most salient for the future of academic design models for public school systems. Further investigation to garner the most actionable points to problem solve and create a more desirable cyber/virtual setting. There are many trends within this body of research suggesting that parents value the ability to choose. They indicate a need for public systems to offer parents a minimum of choice in educating students. It will behoove the district to take heed of the feedback gleaned. Another takeaway to consider is rethinking emergency cancellation events and developing procedures for inclement weather during the school term when students cannot attend in-person instructional days can still occur with a fallback to a virtual academic environment. The administration will have to work closely with teachers and parents, ensuring appropriate implementation of the IEP, emphasizing the specially designed instruction and modification aspects for the particular student population. Doing so will not be as tedious as the district will have the current model utilized as a scaffold.

### **Conclusions**

This study sheds light on parent opinion regarding their children's education in the cyber/virtual setting. The students all served under the Special Services

department of a large, diverse urban Pennsylvania public school district. Findings organized in the graph representation from survey responses and an analysis of interview responses with specifics on the pros and cons of the district's cyber/virtual setting.

Trends in perceptions denoted a general sense of dissatisfaction with cyber/virtual settings. Emergent themes identified several affecting points from lack of addressing student academic needs, and social-emotional deficits, to the change of roles for both parents and teachers, viewing a more intense parental role. In contrast, the view of the teacher's role was as a guide or facilitator to the learning process. There was one overwhelming positive trend recorded amongst the participant responses, no incidents of cyberbully cited within the cyber/virtual setting. The significance in this trend is notable as Schade, B.P., Larwin, K.H., Larwin, D.A. (2017) finds this type of behavior happens a lot in the cyber atmosphere. Nevertheless, overall, most parents were definitive in their plan moving forward for their child's academic option, noting they will send their children to the brick-and-mortar setting for the upcoming school year.

The school district had little time to implement and less time to plan before implementing the setting due to the urgency of the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, the district has the needed data for actionable improvements essential is real-time parent feedback. The district's efforts were grand, the foundation formed, and the input provided to make the cyber/virtual option a viable lasting hallmark of the district. With appropriate planning and professional development, cyber/virtual education options provided by the school district can benefit students who cannot attend the brick-and-mortar school.

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## Appendix A

### Cyber/Virtual School Parent Survey

Choose the best option for each question

Email \*

Valid email

This form is collecting emails. [Change settings](#)

Please identify your race \*

- Caucasian
- African American
- Hispanic
- Prefer not say

Please identify your gender \*

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

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3/2021 Survey (disabilities) - 6 Open with ▾

Which disability category does your child fall under \*

- Learning Support
- Speech/Language Impairment
- Other health impairment/ ADHD
- Autism
- Emotional Support
- Intellectual Disability
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Multiple Disabilities
- Visual Impairment/Blindness
- Hearing Impairment/ Deafness
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Other

Please select your child's current grade \*

- K-2
- 3-5
- 6-8
- 9-12

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Child's current educational setting \*

Open with ▾

Back in traditional setting from cyber school

Back in traditional setting from virtual school

Currently in cyber school

Currently a virtual student

Has the cyber/virtual school improved your child's outlook on school? \*

No

Yes

I don't know

Has the cyber/virtual school been successful in meeting your child's educational needs as outlined in the IEP \*

No

Yes

I don't know

Has your child's academic progress improved in cyber/virtual school? \*

No

Yes

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Open with ▾

Do you feel you have to support/assist your child more in the cyber/virtual setting? \*

No

Yes

I don't know

Are you satisfied with the cyber/virtual school compared traditional school? \*

Less satisfied

Equally satisfied

More satisfied

Other...

How effective has cyber/virtual school been in addressing your child's academic needs? \*

Fully effective

Somewhat effective

Not effective

Unsure

What is the role of the teacher in the cyber/virtual school? \*

Guide learning

Other

Open with ▼

How does the cyber/virtual teacher role compare from traditional school? \*

More helpful

Equally helpful

Less helpful

Unsure

What is your parent role in cyber/virtual school? \*

Guide learning

Assist child

Unsure

How does your role as parent in a cyber/virtual school compare to traditional school? \*

More involved

Equally involved

Less involved

Unsure

12/2021 Survey observations - Co Open with

answer only if your child experienced bullying in cyber/virtual school

Has the bullying been worse in cyber/virtual school \*

No

Yes

Does not apply

Has the cyber/virtual school addressed the bullying \*

No

Yes

Does not apply

Are you satisfied with the way the cyber/virtual school handled the bullying \*

No

Yes

I don't know

After section 2 Submit form

1/12/2021

Survey (dissemination) - Google Forms

No

Somewhat

Yes

Has your child experienced bullying in the cyber/virtual school ?

No

Yes

I don't know

If the cyber/virtual school through the district is no longer offered will you seek to find an alternate cyber/virtual school option ?

No

Yes

I don't know

Is there anything else that you would like us to know about your school experience?

Long answer text

After section 1 Submit form

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7/12/2021

Survey (classroom) - Google Forms

Please provide a brief statement

Is there anything that would persuade you to keep your student in the traditional school? \*

No

Yes, please share what you would like to see on the next line

Other...

## Appendix B

