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Bill poses reality check for virtual schools



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Matthew Rogers, 13, in his bedroom, which also serves as his classroom in Oregon Connections Academy, an online school that he attends.

Education | Oregon is looking to control the growth and quality of online charter schools

By **BILL GRAVES**
THE OREGONIAN

The schools might be virtual, but the controversy they've stirred is playing out for real from the Statehouse to the Andersons' house.

Legislation in Salem proposes restrictions on Oregon's blooming virtual charter school industry. The bill has pitted the state's most powerful education organizations, including the teachers union, against online schools and parents. The battle has produced rallies on the Capitol steps, a flurry of lobbying, the birth of a parents group and 19 revisions of the bill.

Oregon Connections Academy

Oregon's first and biggest public virtual charter school

Founded: 2005

Sponsor: Scio school district

Number of teachers: 72, scattered across the state

Enrollment: 2,710 students in kindergarten through grade 12

Number of Scio students: 10

Where academy draws other students: From 142 school districts in 35 counties

Total students in all Oregon virtual charter schools: About 4,000

"This is a very emotional issue," says Sen. Rick Metsger, D-Welches, an education committee member.

Virtual charter schools are public schools that operate through a charter or contract with a local district or the Oregon Board of Education. They employ teachers who provide lessons online using electronic documents, videos, e-mail, regular mail, telephones and sometimes Web cameras.

In its latest version, Senate Bill 767 calls for a two-year moratorium on the expansion or creation of virtual charter schools until a work group can study the best policies for regulating them.

On a 3-2 vote, the Senate education committee sent the bill to the rules committee, where it awaits action. Education groups say the bill offers a reasonable compromise, but some virtual schools say the moratorium would

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Online school: Teen's room serves as his classroom

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operating, Connections Academy was exempt from the rules and has ballooned into the state's largest virtual charter. It enrolls 2,700 students in kindergarten through grade 12, only 10 of whom live in Scio, a town of fewer than 1,000 people.

Annette and Christopher Anderson of Gresham have enrolled three of their seven children in the Connections Academy and a fourth is in the process of signing up. Their other three children are preschoolers.

The two oldest boys, Matthew Rogers, 13, a seventh-grader, and Cameron Rogers, 15, a freshman, said they struggled in public schools but are earning A's and B's at Connections. They prefer virtual school, they say.

Cameron's bedroom is also his classroom, where he spends five to seven hours a day on his lessons at a desk in the corner with a laptop. He learns at his own pace. He talks to teachers and classmates online, sometimes calls his teachers and meets them occasionally face to face.

Last week, he had just finished reading "To Kill a Mockingbird" for English, was learning about the Vietnam War in U.S. history and was doing 100 pushups three times a week for physical education. His favorite class is biology, for which he sometimes does virtual dissections on his laptop.

"Tomorrow I have frog dissection," he says. "I might do the lab for frog dissection today because



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Christopher Anderson, 27, (second from left) and his wife, Annette Anderson, 38 (not present) of Gresham are sending their four school-aged children to school via the Internet through Oregon Connections Academy. The children are (from left back row) Dakota Anderson, 2; Cameron Rogers, 15; Austin Crawford, 6; Krystopher Anderson, 5; and Matthew Rogers, 13. Seated in front are 3-year-old twins Ty Anderson (left), and Chloe Anderson.

the squid dissection was really cool."

His brother Matthew is in the room next door reading a novel called "Walk Two Moons" and reading a lesson about snake bites connected with the book. He has the same teacher for all of his classes and talks to her often by e-mail and telephone, sometimes sees her teach a lesson online and occasionally sees her face to face.

Learning coach

The boys' mother, Annette

Anderson, 38, serves as learning coach, a position required by the school, and oversees her children's lessons and administers their tests. She says her children thrive in Connections, and if it were closed, she would find another way to keep teaching her children at home.

"You know what your kids are learning," she says.

Oregon Connections subscribes to services from Connections Academy, a Baltimore for-profit company that has contracts with

virtual schools in 14 other states. Two other national companies—Insight Schools, based in Portland, and K-12 Inc., based in Virginia—also have tried to establish virtual schools in Oregon.

The Oregon Education Association, the state's largest teachers union; the American Federation of Teachers; the Oregon School Employees Association; and the Confederation of School Administrators requested the Senate bill to establish controls on growth and quality with the "stampede of private entrepreneurs" setting up virtual charters in Oregon, says Chuck Bennett, lobbyist for school administrators.

"We're not going to wait until it is out of control," he says.

School districts also are concerned about virtual charters drawing money from regular public schools when they are facing revenue shortfalls. Charter schools draw about \$5,800 per student.

"There is a level of resentment when you are in Pendleton and see students and funding leaving for a district hundreds of miles away," Bennett says.

The bill offers a reasonable compromise to ensure virtual schools are transparent, high quality and equitable, says Becca Uherbelau, spokeswoman for the Oregon Education Association. For example, the union questions whether virtual education is appropriate for young children when research shows they learn better in a relationship with a

teacher, she says.

But backers say that's a smoke-screen. The union and other school groups "would just like to see the schools closed," says Kaaren Heikes, executive director of the Northwest Center for Education Options, which helps and champions charter schools. "The kids would be displaced, and why? They are engaged."

Special needs students

Parents told legislators the schools have been vital for children with allergies and other medical and social problems, for teen mothers, for students living in remote corners of the state and for children with other special circumstances and needs.

"These schools have been a safety net for these kids," says Angie Armstrong, 35, of Coos Bay and president of a parent group formed in March called the Oregon Virtual Public School Alliance.

Devlin, the Senate majority leader, says there is a place for virtual schools but "there is clear opportunity for exploitation" by for-profit businesses.

Devlin predicts the bill will reach the Senate floor. Opponents seek a compromise.

"If we could all get in a room together, get the right people, the right date, the right attitude," Heikes says, "I think we could figure this out."

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