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The Social Justice Frames in the Cyber Charter Schools in Pennsylvania

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ABSTRACT

Cyber charter schools are online schools that deliver educational content to students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. These programs provide the entire schooling experience through remote access to a virtual learning environment. Since cyber charters are a new educational platform, there is limited scholarly research discerning if they promote or detract from social justice in education. In mainstream dialogue, supporters hail cyber charters as providers of a quality education to students dissatisfied by their traditional school settings. For opponents, the schools are framed as providers of inadequate academic outcomes with a lack of social opportunity. To synthesize these disparate arguments, the authors examine Pennsylvania cyber charter website content and news stories in the popular press. The authors then discuss how these arguments relate to a social justice framework, considering potential implications for both Pennsylvania and outside entities who may wish to implement cyber charter schools in their local context.

Keywords: Cyber Charter School, Cyber School, Digital Divide, E-Learning, Equity, Ethics in Education, Online Education, Online Learning, Rights, Social Justice, Virtual School

INTRODUCTION

A cyber charter is a publically funded, privately operated school that provides formal education to students ranging from Kindergarten to 12th grade. Using public funds, cyber charters provide students the technology and materials to receive course content online from their homes. The schools are vital in the K-12 online education movement that has emerged in the United States during the past 10 years. More than 30 states plus Washington, D.C. have at least one fulltime online school, enrolling more than 275,000 students in 2011-12 (Watson et al., 2012). While the movement is certainly relevant to policymakers in the United States, the topic will be of increasing interest to international audiences because at least one of the providers of cyber charters in Pennsylvania (K12 Incorporated) has started an international branch with sights set on enrolling students abroad.

The word “cyber” captures the online aspect of the schools while the word “charter” indicates that the schools are choice-based alternatives to traditional settings (for further charter ex-
planations see: Budde, 1989 or Chubb & Moe, 1990). The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is important in the cyber charter movement because it is a forerunner in online enrollment and has encountered much controversy while doing so. This paper will use Pennsylvania cyber charters as a case to analyze disparate statements about considerations of the schools within frameworks of social justice.

Intuitively, cyber charters lay within a fundamental paradox related to issues of social justice in education. In one regard, the schools can be hailed as great equalizers because they allow students to engage with content they may not have been capable of accessing prior to enrollment in an online setting, which in turn can diminish inequality caused by geographic boundaries. Conversely, even though users have access to more information, they sacrifice their ability to engage with a sufficient amount of physical resources, which can manifest itself through limited prospects of receiving basic services such as food, socialization, and emotional support.

The above paradox highlights potential positive and negative ramifications of K-12 online education, but cyber charters in Pennsylvania have developed in such a way that actual ramifications can be observed to see if the schools enhance or exacerbate social justice. In 2011-12, Pennsylvania’s combination of “mega” and “mom and pop” cyber charters enrolled more than 30,000 students, which ranked the Commonwealth third in enrollment in the United States (DeJarnatt, 2013; Watson et al., 2012). As cyber charters have grown in Pennsylvania, concerns emerged academically, financially, and politically.

The academic concerns are highlighted in that no cyber charter received a passing score on the Commonwealth’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) metric in 2011-12 (Niederberger, 2013). Additionally, a 2011 report by Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) showed that enrollees in Pennsylvania cyber charters had statistically significant lower learning gains in both math and reading compared to traditional students. While standardized tests and AYP statuses can only provide a glimpse of academic performance, they initiate concerns about possible poor academic practices. Furthermore, various think tanks and media outlets have released reports that question the day-to-day activities of the schools (Miron & Urschel, 2012; Niederberger, 2012; Niederberger, 2013; Saul, 2012).

The financial and political issues arose when the Pennsylvania Auditor General released a report in 2012 that showed that the cyber charter funding formula depletes local school district funds, hurting traditional schools (Wagner, 2012). The concerns about cyber charters peaked on January 28, 2013 when Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, Ron Tomalis, denied all applications for new cyber charters. In a press release the Department stated that the rejection happened due to “significant deficiencies in curriculum, finance, and overall operations” and “cyber charter schools and learning centers are not to be used as an alternative to the brick-and-mortar model” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013).

Amongst the backdrop of both increased enrollment and heightened controversy, this paper examines cyber charters and considers their position in both the promotion and exacerbation of social justice in education. Because cyber charters are a new form of education, providers and supporters (namely the school websites) have made statements that suggest the schools can improve social justice in education throughout the Commonwealth, while opponents (namely popular media articles) suggest the schools promote unjust educational practices. With these considerations, this study examines two fundamental questions: What are the arguments in the statements that articulate suggestions that cyber charters promote social justice in education? What are the arguments in the statements that articulate that cyber charters detract from social justice? This study uses qualitative document analysis techniques to identify statements about cyber charter schools that address both questions. Then, based on the findings, the authors consider and discuss the best ways to manage the growth of cyber charter schools so their implementation promotes social justice rather than detracts from it.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Recent literature on social justice for school children has been mainly limited to modern conceptualizations of the rights of students centered around school choice, vouchers, and charter schools in general (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2009). The context in the United States dates back to the common school movement; an era which marked the first concern for student achievement and first real move toward inclusion for the greater good (Kaestle & Foner, 1983). At the time, the primary purpose of education was to produce moral citizens educated in the ideals of the new republic. While social justice was not explicitly cited as the reason for common schools, there was a sense that “the common good” would be better if all citizens could participate in democracy and were educated enough to pursue “a good life” (Kaestle & Foner, 1983).

For this study we use the definition of social justice that is an amalgamation of various thinkers and philosophers. In A Theory of Social Justice, John Rawls (1999) writes that social justice is the ability for people to make the best life possible for themselves within their society. Joseph Raz (1986) echoes this and stresses the importance of autonomy and maintenance of individual rights under justified power as important. In Liberal Rights Jeremy Waldron (1993) emphasizes that social justice, being based on liberal theory in general, must have some concept of individuality at its core. This does not mean that society ought to be ignored and the individual dismissed, but it does mean that a consideration of social justice in any arena of thought must recognize that society is comprised of individuals with motivations and not masses of people with common goals.

All social justice theories mentioned above stem from a broader conception of liberalism on which most modern democracies are based. Liberalism, in turn, is derived from the work of John Stuart Mill and John Locke. Mill’s further conception of liberty and “social liberty” has informed modern thinkers about the role of government and limits of power. Furthermore, Locke’s justification of the social contract is often cited as the basis for modern governments and formalized structures of control. Locke posited that free society forms out of a mutually beneficial agreement on the value of justice, toleration, and the primacy of human reason. Justice is therefore a founding principle of liberal society in general and forms an essential component of most social justice definitions. We therefore define social justice as when citizens in a society are free from oppression, able to freely exercise their rights, and willingly can participate in the processes of government by choice.

In School Choice and Social Justice, Harry Brighouse (2000) applies social justice theory to school choice and argues that school choice is a way to support social justice in the education. Brighouse outlines the liberal concepts of Parental Rights, Efficiency, Parental Involvement, Diversity and Innovation, and Equity. These categories are signposts of social justice in school choice programs, which we apply when discussing ways cyber charters can augment or detract from social justice for students. However, we differ from Brighouse in our application of these categories because our findings suggest that the framing of cyber charters falls only within two categories: Equity and Rights.

With this consideration, we will first briefly discuss rights and then move to explain our definition of equity. We consider rights to be any legally or ethically entitled benefit that students and children can claim within a public education system. Even though children do not officially have a recognized “right to an adequate education” granted by the United States constitution, we consider it an ethical right to provide them with one. This consideration includes the right to a safe school, adequate teaching, and children with special needs having their educational needs accommodated by their schools. In order for a school to contribute to students’ rights it must enact policies that are unobtrusive, do not
prohibit free exercise of rights, and actively encourage their manifestation. By these criteria we examine the claims made by proponents and opponents of cyber charters. Upon reporting the findings, the names of cyber charters, news reports, and actors have been blinded for the purpose of anonymity.

Equity is a more difficult concept to apply, but we seek to define equity for students as the ability to change schools and receive a comparable education, having their needs met in equal measure, and being allowed to be uninhibited in their pursuit of education. This means cyber charters must provide access to high quality curriculum in equal measure to their traditional brick-and-mortar counterparts, as well as allow students the ability to receive the same benefits and services they would get if they attended a physical school. In order to enhance equity, cyber charters need to increase or improve access and meet the same educational and extracurricular standards that traditional, offline schools are expected to maintain.

**METHODOLOGY**

The primary method used in this study was document analysis. We coded and analyzed 44 documents. The first document set included 38 sections taken from the websites of the cyber charters themselves. At least two sections of each website of every cyber charter school were coded and analyzed. These documents tended to be biased in support of cyber charter schools and provided us with an understanding of how the schools framed their own practices. We focused on sections that fell under the categories: “Home Page,” “Frequently Asked Questions,” and “About Us.” The second set of documents included six news reports and stories found in the mainstream media about cyber charter schools. The news reports ranged from brief news stories to feature pieces of several pages in length. Although our document search yielded only six stories, they were used in the analysis because they explicitly discussed the cyber charter schools and their practices. These articles countered many of the claims suggested on the cyber charter school websites. Although their quantity is much lower than the number of websites we analyzed, the data in these documents were rich and provided necessary counter-claims to those made on cyber charter websites, thus providing us with a complete set of documents that captured a wide range of arguments about cyber charter schools.

We used an emergent coding structure for all of the documents analyzed (Stemler, 2001). Once the documents were gathered, we independently analyzed each and placed statements into various thematic categories. After coding and placing the statements into categories, we met and triangulated the findings, corroborating the themes and dividing them into broader categories of social justice. These categories include: *promoting equity*, *supporting rights*, *exacerbating inequity*, and *limiting rights*. The categories were based on analysis of the emergent themes and how they fit within the social justice classifications considered in the theoretical framework.

The purpose of analyzing both websites and news reports found in the mainstream media was to compile and categorize the statements made about various practices of the cyber charters. The purpose of this analysis was not to focus on the outcomes or efficacy of the programs; rather, it was to classify the arguments and statements found in the various texts into categories of social justice. In other words, our goal was to analyze what actors in the cyber charter movement have been saying about the schools and categorize how these statements place the cyber charters into frameworks of promoting or exacerbating issues of social justice.

Due to limitations of data collection, this study did not use interviews with families or other stakeholders. This is a clear limitation, but the authors see this study as a beginning point for analyzing social justice in cyber schools. We view this study as merely a starting point for other research in the area and think that an effective follow-up study would include interviews and observations of students with the goal of seeing if the voices of stakeholders
match the documents analyzed here. The study is also limited to cyber charter schools only in Pennsylvania. Thus, there is limited capacity to generalize some of the findings. A final limitation is that the study only analyzes arguments to develop a framework and did not use original statistical or qualitative data to show what actually happens in the schools. This paper, however, could be used as a framework for a follow-up empirical study.

**FINDINGS**

The sub-themes that emerged from the coding of the statements about cyber charters fit within the following categories related to social justice: *promoting equity, supporting rights, exacerbating inequity, and limiting rights*. This section will explain the social justice arguments that emerged in the data and provide examples of statements that reflect the themes. After this section, we will discuss the implications of these findings.

**Promoting Equity**

In this section, as well as the section *exacerbating inequity*, we examine ideas of equity in the sense of providing all students equitable allotments to academic material as well as educational experiences. This includes having teachers support student learning of material at a variety of difficulty levels, while also considering the potential costs of receiving this support. Ideally, since costs are often a major barrier in providing equitable access to education, lower costs for families should translate into more equitable access of academic material.

**Increased Access to Curriculum**

One argument found in the data about how cyber charters promote equity is that they provide students access to curricula they would not have had previous to enrollment in the schools. An example of such a statement comes from one cyber charter website, which says, “[The school] offers several personal supports, such as 1:1 time with teachers, in-person support during the initial transition to online learning, and an expanded course catalogue that includes several AP courses, especially desirable to our gifted learners.” This exemplifies how cyber charters place themselves in the conversation about curricula, stating that they provide access to Advance Placement (AP) or other specialized courses, even if the student’s original school did not provide these courses.

**Providing Resources**

Another way that cyber charters framed the promotion of equity is with the argument that they provide physical resources and materials to students who traditionally do not have these at home. Since they are publically funded, the schools offer free computers, a connection to the Internet, textbooks, and other resources such as printers and scanners. Statements about the provision of resources emerged on the cyber charter websites through lines such as, “[The school] utilizes the latest technologies and tools for learning. At no extra cost, we will mail your child the hardware and software necessary to participate in our curriculum.” As the statement shows, one of the advantages of using the programs is they provide valuable resources to families. Having access to these resources on a daily basis could mitigate issues known as the digital divide, which is the idea that members of society are at a disadvantage because they do not have the physical access or the knowledge to use technology effectively (Hargittai, 2002; Norris, 2003).

**Financial Fairness**

The final theme that emerged regarding the promotion of equity in the cyber charter school statements was that the programs and courses came at no cost for the enrolled students. This is important in that the cyber charters framed themselves as a free solution families can use to obtain all of the positive components that they offer. The focus of the argument was that the programs are accessible to families in every socio-economic demographic and do not put burdens on poor families in acquiring school resources and material.
Supporting Rights

In this section, as well as the section limiting rights, we examine rights in the sense that students have the legal and ethical right to a free and high quality public education. With this consideration, families have the right to accurate information about school quality and the ability express their concerns, while students have the right to a safe and effective learning environment.

Enhanced Parental Choice

One highly contested issue of student educational rights in the context of the United States charter school movement is that of a family’s choice to select the educational provider for their children. An argument found in the data frames cyber charter providers as promoters of student rights because they provide an avenue for parental choice. The argument is that since parents should have a fundamental right to choose how their children are educated, the schools provide a choice-based alternative to the public school system. To make rights-based claims such as these, cyber charters provided statements like, “The [school] is dedicated to providing a choice in education for the students in the Commonwealth. We believe that a school should serve its students in a student-centered learning environment, designed to promote success for every student.” While debates over allowing parental choice continue in the landscape of U.S. educational policy, it is clear that if one considers choice a promotion of rights, then cyber charters fulfill this standard.

Student Safety

Another argument about student rights that was found in the data was that cyber charters provide inherently safe environments. In the data there were statements like, “A cyber school minimizes negative socialization by reducing the risk of drugs, alcohol, gangs, fights, bullying, and the fear associated with an unsafe environment. Our school is ideal for students who have trouble attending school for health and social reasons.” With this, cyber charter supporters place the schools within a framework that sees them protecting the rights of students within the realm of safety. This promotes the idea that if students reside within a school district that is not safe, the cyber charter supports students’ right to safety by allowing them to access educational materials from their home.

Personalized and High-Quality Education

A final statement that supporters of cyber charters provide about promoting the rights of students is that students have the right to learn at their own pace. This argument is that students often do not receive a high quality education because they can get promoted for the time they serve rather than the content they master. This theme was captured in claims like, “unlike a traditional school, students can work at their own pace and on their own schedule” and “because the curriculum for all of our core classes, and some of our electives, is written and developed by our staff, we can make adjustments and accommodations to suit the needs of unique learners, helping them reach their full potential.” Statements such as these suggest that cyber charter programs fulfill a student’s right to a high-quality education because they have the capability of providing a personalized learning environment.

Exacerbating Inequity

The above statements about cyber charters in the promoting equity and supporting rights sections show how supporters of cyber charters frame the capabilities of the schools advancing equity and rights. Detracting statements point to many practice-based issues and suggest the schools do the opposite. This next section will explain how those opposing cyber charters frame how the schools exacerbate inequity and limit rights.

Lack of Daily Interaction

Statements in the data argue that cyber charters raise concerns of inequity because students in cyber programs do not have the same levels of daily interaction with teachers and peers as they
would in traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Statements that revealed this finding assumed that schooling is more than just a process of knowledge acquisition; rather also a process that serves additional functions such as socialization, acculturation, and indoctrination into a society.

This argument seemed so common in the cyber charter narrative that the schools themselves addressed the concerns by rebutting them on their own websites. For example, schools made statements like “The [school] recognizes that online learning can be isolating for some. Seeking to increase student interaction and create a sense of responsibility to one another, [this school] hosts an Orientation Retreat early in the school year,” and “socialization abounds at [this school]. Each of the Family Support Coordinators (FSC) offers three outings a month throughout the state. That is 39 [school name] social activities each month!” As shown in the two statements, the cyber charters address issues of interaction and socialization directly. Their stance is that some practices, such as an orientation and social outings, can compensate for the lack of daily interaction; however, in the news reports, opponents stated that a major flaw in the programs is that the lack of daily interaction causes inequitable chances to become acclimated to society.

**School Quality**

There were other statements in the data about how cyber charters in Pennsylvania exacerbate inequity because of poor quality. The statements posited that in their current conception, cyber charters are of poorer quality than traditional schools. It is important to note that these statements related to traditional metrics of school quality, such as test scores, graduation rates, and student attribution. One news article captured this framing with how it described the practices of a specific cyber charter saying, “Nearly 60 percent of its students are behind grade level in math. Nearly 50 percent trail in reading. A third do not graduate on time. And hundreds of children, from kindergartners to seniors, withdraw within months after they enroll.” Here it is clear that opponents argue that the poor performance of cyber charter schools on traditional metrics causes unequal distribution of educational practices.

**Limiting Rights**

This final findings section will discuss statements about cyber charter schools that frame the programs as limiting the rights of students. Statements and arguments were placed in this category if an argument saw cyber charter schools as inhibiting the legal and ethical right to a free and high quality public education. Inhibitors included a lack of accountability for quality and the withholding or distortion of information about educational practices.

**Accountability of Programs**

The first theme that emerged in this section of the data related to school accountability. The argument was that student rights were violated because cyber charter school operators were not held accountable for ineffective and/or illegal practices. These statements inferred that cyber charters did not adhere, nor were held accountable, to the same standard as public schools. When discussing the practices of cyber charters, one news article quoted an interviewee who discussed accountability as such:

*I believe that there are some charter schools doing a really good job but it’s pretty obvious from some of the reports we’ve seen that the lack of oversight, lack of transparency, and lack of regulations and controls that we now have in our public school systems simply are not there for charter schools in every case.*

Other statements regarding cyber charters reiterated this idea that not only have cyber charter schools had low measures of effectiveness, but also these failures were overlooked as the schools have been held to a lower standard than traditional public schools. These concerns related to finances, enrollment statistics, and teacher working conditions.
**Marketing Inhibits the Right to Know Accurate Information**

The final finding relates to the right to accurate information about educational options. Based on the analysis of the documents, cyber charter websites are used as marketing tools to present information in a manner that is beneficial to the cyber charter programs. Thus, the statements provided on cyber charter websites are often skewed in the direction of promoting the cyber charter program. This finding is consistent with the literature about charter schools in general, as brick-and-mortar charter schools have employed key marketing strategies to generate their enrollment (Lubienski, 2007). In regards to the cyber charters, the marketing skews in a few directions: imaging on the website, use of data, and the withholding of information.

The imaging used consistently across the cyber charter websites shows students in environments apt for learning. The websites show students of a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds engaged in learning activities that appear fun. The use of imaging on the cyber charter websites is clearly used in a way to try to enhance enrollment from a diverse group of students. These students sometimes are even placed in situations not related to completing learning activities on the computer, such as riding horses, playing hockey, and performing ballet.

Another facet of the cyber charter websites is that there is a presentation of pseudo-data on multiple websites. These presentations include information that ranges with statements such as “an award winning curriculum with more than 700 lessons per subject” to more egregious, and perhaps misleading claims like, “96% of parents agree our curriculum is of high quality.” This presentation of data can be misleading to parents because non-traditional and often erroneous metrics are used to generate perceptions of school quality.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this section is to discuss the findings of the study in the social justice context. Every attempt is made to provide examples or hypothetical situations to make clearer our analysis. In some cases the analysis may only apply to schools within our study and generalizations may only be possible for schools within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In other cases the social justice arguments could be extended to all platforms for online learning. Overall, the goal of this section is to discuss the arguments found in the document analysis while also considering broader themes for online learning.

**Promoting Equity**

**Increased Access to Curriculum**

In many ways cyber charters are the first universally accessible alternatives to the traditional public schools. Prior to their existence, only wealthy families could afford alternative schools as a way to escape sub-optimal public education in a given local district. With cyber charters, it might be possible for disadvantaged students to receive better education from a distant teacher.

It remains to be seen whether or not cyber charter schools will actually deliver on the promise of increased access to high quality curriculum, but the potential exists. It is important to note, however, that the promise exists because of the technology and not some great leap forward in pedagogy or curriculum. Indeed, any improvement on the curriculum of many underfunded and understaffed schools – as such is the case in many of Pennsylvania’s urban districts (Hurdle, 2014) – would be contribution to social justice in terms of creating better access for students.

Cyber charters in Pennsylvania are adopting the Common Core State Standards (Pennsylvania School Board Association, 2014). This means that they seem to be offering essentially the same content as traditional
schools and students will be held to the same academic standards as every other school in the Commonwealth. The main difference then is the delivery method. In order for equitable access through cyber charters to be achieved, the delivery method has to be proven effective in K-12 settings.

Providing Resources

Cyber charters also provide suitable resources to students who are essentially working from home. This means cyber charters send their students textbooks, a computer, an internet connection, and sometimes even a headset and webcam. Some students who enroll in cyber charter schools would not have access to such technology or capability otherwise. Creating an opportunity for students to receive additional resources is a way to promote equity and contribute to increased social justice for students across the Commonwealth if educational practices are equal to or better than traditional public schools. However, if the parents are lured into detrimental academic programs due to technological inducements, we do not consider it just for students to receive technology in place of an effective education.

Financial Fairness

Lastly, cyber charter schools cost families no more money than traditional brick and mortar schools. By offering increased access and improved resources at the same cost, the cyber charters offer a potentially beneficial situation to students who come from struggling districts. If cyber charters do indeed offer a potential escape from a failing school at a lower cost, then their practices certainly enhance equity.

Supporting Rights

Parental Choice

Cyber charters communicate to parents the potential benefits of their schooling method, which allows for parents to exercise their parental rights. In a society that values the safety and, perhaps more saliently, the education of children, it is important for parents to be able to exercise these rights as a mode of protection and advocacy. This enhances social justice through increased autonomy for parents in a system that often seeks to decrease it. Allowing autonomous exercise of parental rights is in line with the doctrine of individualism that is central to liberal theory mentioned in the theoretical framework and therefore promotes social justice.

Student Safety

Students have a right to attend school in a safe environment. It is no secret that school safety is a concern for some parents (Williams, 2012) and that there have been incidents to provide reasons to be concerned (such as school shootings, violence, school bus accidents). By offering the opportunity to bypass potentially dangerous situations, cyber charters contribute to social justice. Danger, with regards to schools, may be perceived or very real. Some students feel threatened by bullies. Some schools are dominated by gangs or violence. Cyber charters can hypothetically shelter students from these dangers by allowing them to attend school at home.

Personalized and High-Quality Education

Lastly, students are entitled to the right to have their individual needs met by the school they attend. This differs from curriculum in one important way. Schools are required to provide services to students with special needs and cyber charter schools are no different. In some cases the specific services provided – such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) – may be more complete or better suited to the student than they would be in a traditional school. Many students with special needs may benefit from receiving instruction at home and cyber charters provide this opportunity.
Exacerbating Inequity

Lack of Daily Interaction

Daily interaction with other people, whether social or instructional, is a part of everyday life for students at a traditional school. Cyber charters do not yet appear to have a universally applicable or even fully feasible plan to socialize children. Many schools provide access to teachers for students, but only through email and phone conversations. As reported in the news documents, the current formation of cyber charters in Pennsylvania makes us think that the Pennsylvania model of online K-12 teaching does not provide the same daily interaction as a traditional setting. Whether it is the questions asked, the non-verbal cues that teachers pick up, or a lack of substantive human engagement, it seems as if cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania are missing a key ingredient.

Social interaction is important to student development (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Without practice in social interactions, dealing with emotions, and making friends it could be that students in cyber charters are at a disadvantage in their transition into adulthood. Some cyber charters plan opportunities for students to meet and socialize, but these limited meetings hardly substitute for forced daily social interactions that take place in a traditional school. It is also important to note that the limited daily interactions are no fault of the school administration, staff, or teachers but are merely a product of the design of the school. The limited daily interactions may exacerbate inequity and create a situation where social justice is diminished for students enrolled in cyber charter schools. In this regard, cyber charter implementation (or K-12 online education implementation in general) should come with considerations on how the schools will counter this deficiency.

School Quality

The statements about the quality of cyber charter schools raise further social justice concerns. While it is true that cyber charters have the capability to increase social justice by mitigating equity gaps between wealthy and disadvantaged groups, they may simultaneously increase educational inequity by falsely implying success without any evidence to make such claims. By leveraging parent values with claims of academic achievement, they are likely to attract students that (1) may not do well in the untested cyber school setting and (2) that might otherwise do well in a traditional physical school.

As noted in the findings section, cyber charters often market themselves as universal solutions for all students. This practice decreases social justice by creating an equity gap along lines of perception. Those who perceive their school as bad will switch and those who do not will not choose to switch. These two choices represent a false dichotomy of sorts whereby members of either group might be objectively better suited having never been presented with the choice in the first place.

Limiting Rights

Accountability Programs

According to the arguments in the findings, there appears in Pennsylvania to be a general lack of political and educational accountability for cyber charters. We can only speculate as to the causes for these lapses, but the charges of fraud and continued failure to meet the academic standards of the Commonwealth as determined by annual high stakes tests leads us to believe that cyber charters are operating with little supervision. Hypothetically, cyber charter schools can be closed or held accountable for failing to meet certain goals, but this has not happened. The lack of official accountability, both financial and academic, infringes on the rights of students, parents, and taxpaying citizens. Without a robust system in place to monitor cyber charters and enforce standards, the rights of these stakeholders are limited. Instituting a stronger accountability system would help solve the problem.
Marketing Inhibits the Right to Know Accurate Information

Finally, there are ethical and social justice concerns based on the ability of cyber charters to use their educational delivery platform (their website) as a marketing tool. In many cases related to the cyber charters of Pennsylvania, web-based advertisements are targeted at parents who are already “in the market” for a new school. The advertising messages are meant to leverage this feeling of inadequacy, whether justified or not, and create a liking and preference where one may not have existed before; or may not have been necessary before. This hair-trigger exercise of rights is indicative of the overall climate of the school choice movement; they assume the inferiority of many traditional schools. The reality is that most students would do well in traditional schools, but feel they are not getting the best education possible. The cyber charter marketing strategies may operationalize these feelings and lead to parental decisions that may be misinformed.

CONCLUSION

Understanding social justice in the context of cyber charter schools allows us to triangulate the overall performance of the schools without using test data, grades, or other metrics. Whether or not the schools are meeting their ethical duties to promote social justice is usually fairly clear. Although this study is only a starting point for further research, the framing of statements and arguments about cyber charters shows that the programs have the potential to both promote and detract from social justice in terms of equity and student rights. Reformers who wish to implement online educational programs in their own settings should consider the context of the Pennsylvania cyber charters and decide a best course of action to implement just and equitable K-12 programs. Educational leaders should be careful to take advantage of cyber schooling’s ability to increase the access to curriculum, provide students with resources, personalize the programs to meet learner needs, and do all of it at little or no cost to students while structuring programs to engender accountability, avoid coercive marketing, and be sure students have ample opportunity to interact. Of course, proven programs that are of high-quality should be the only models used.

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