

EDITORIAL

Closing of K-8 cyber school leaves an opening for others

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ONLINE EDUCATION suffered a glancing blow recently when the Greenfield School Committee decided to close the state's first and only cyber school. The demise of the Massachusetts Virtual Academy will create a temporary vacuum, but also open a new opportunity for the state's energetic education-reform community.

The Greenfield School Committee, some of whose members had long been ambivalent about their online experiment, will close the K-8 cyber school at the end of June. Under a new state law, the school would have had to seek permission from the state to continue operating, and accept greater oversight. That didn't sit well with the school committee.

Nonetheless, state policymakers had legitimate concerns. Most of the academy's 470 students aren't from Greenfield, which means the city was essentially running a statewide school without state oversight. Further, the fledgling school's educational results were mixed at best.

All that said, however, the online academy, which opened in 2010, has provided a definite service to a student population that, for reasons such as medical conditions or bullying, found it difficult to attend a bricks-and-mortar school. It has also let students from other schools take courses their own institutions didn't offer. And because there's no ready replacement, its closing will leave a gap in the educational offerings open to Massachusetts students.

Hopefully, that hole will be filled quickly. Under the new law, the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will establish standards, and an application process, for new virtual schools. Commissioner Mitchell Chester says the application process should be ready by fall. The new law allows for three such schools; Chester hopes at least one will be up and running by the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year.

There's a real opportunity here for the state's energetic educational pioneers. Meanwhile, despite the more-with-a-whimper-than-a-bang end of its virtual school, Greenfield deserves some praise for helping to demonstrate that cyber education has a role to play, even in the elementary grades.

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