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# State's first-ever virtual school under probation threat

## Student learning low, officials say

By [James Vaznis](#) | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 20, 2014

The state's first-ever virtual school is under threat of probation by state education officials because of low academic achievement and a failure to meet state curriculum standards.

If the problems persist at the [Greenfield Commonwealth Virtual School](#), which serves 720 students from around the state, it could be forced to close in two years.

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“Academic achievement is quite low, and we have tremendous concern about that,” said Mitchell Chester, the state's commissioner of elementary and secondary education, who pushed for probation.

The review also questioned the school's arrangement with a private company that helps it, including hiring and evaluating teachers.

The state Education Board is scheduled to take up the recommendation for probation at its meeting Tuesday.

Educators around Massachusetts have been closely watching the state's experiment with virtual schools, which offer nearly all instruction online.

The Greenfield school, which opened in 2010, is one of two in Massachusetts. The other one, TEC Connections Academy in East Walpole, opened this fall. Several others could launch in the coming years.

Carl Tillona, executive director of the Greenfield school, said the school has addressed or is addressing the problems highlighted in the state review, which was conducted in May and June. Those remedies include creating a tutoring center, hiring a reading and math interventionist, and launching a family engagement program.

“While it is true that some students are not successful in our program, it is equally true that most others stay, or successfully transition back into their residing district,” Tillona said in a statement in response to Globe questions.

He said that students who have stayed at the school for three years earned MCAS scores on par with state averages, adding “we are hopeful the state will consider this data as well.”

The schools cater to students who are unable to leave their homes because of a medical ailment, who have been expelled, or who are looking for educational opportunities not offered in their traditional schools. The schools also appeal to some who are home-schooled.

Students at the Greenfield School can, for the most part, log on for their classes whenever they want. They must complete five hours a day for kindergarten through Grade 8 and 5.5 hours for high school grades. There are some “live” classes they must take part in at a specific time, according to the school's website. Students do not spend

all their time on the computer for their classes. Sometimes they tackle hands-on projects — such as conducting experiments — or other assignments that pull them away from the screen.

From the start, the Greenfield school has been beset by controversy since it opened four years ago. A state law enacted in that year gave local school districts the power to create virtual schools without approval from the state, and allowed the systems to enroll students beyond their borders. Under that arrangement, the hometown school systems would cover tuition costs — creating a revenue-generating opportunity for the Greenfield school system.

That caused an uproar among superintendents who worried about losing money from their budgets. State education officials, uncomfortable with the idea of local systems running what essentially would be statewide schools, successfully lobbied the Legislature to gain oversight of the schools and of the approval process.

The school in Greenfield, in Western Massachusetts, draws students from more than 170 districts, including dozens in Eastern Massachusetts. The highest numbers come from Boston, at 33; Worcester, 27; and Springfield, 50.

Attending the virtual school is free for families; the \$6,625 in annual tuition is covered by their local school system. Boston, for instance, is paying out more than \$218,000 a year, and Springfield pays \$331,000.

How much of that money is going into the pockets of the publicly traded company — Virginia-based K12 Inc. — remains unclear. The Greenfield virtual school refused to say, and K12 referred all comments to the school.

The school has 10.5 employees, mostly administrators, and is operating on a \$5.8 million budget this year. A program administrator is provided by K12 as well as teachers and many other services. The state review found that the quality of instruction at the school “falls far below” standards, faulting teachers for failing to check for student understanding during lessons and not requiring students to think critically.

Results on this spring's MCAS were lackluster. In English, 60 percent of students scored proficient or higher, compared with 69 percent statewide, and in math 37 percent scored in those two categories, compared with 60 percent statewide.

Tracy O'Connell Novick, a Worcester School Committee member, said she was relieved the state is taking a closer look at the virtual school.

"They are still our kids," she said of the Worcester students enrolled. "We have concerns about the quality of any of the academics they are receiving."

Chester expressed optimism that Massachusetts would find success with virtual schools.

"I don't think this will be the end of virtual schools," he said.

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