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# Cyber-education in Greenfield: Virtual schools, real scrutiny

| OCTOBER 28, 2014

IF SO-CALLED virtual schools are to be a new frontier in education, then there needs to be a tough sheriff in town. That's clear from the recent decision by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to place a K-12 Greenfield cyber-school on probation for shoddy instructional practices.

Massachusetts needs to be on the lookout for innovative ways of teaching students, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with delivering some courses primarily through online methods. The option may be useful for students with frail health, psychological troubles, or a simple preference for home schooling. Nevertheless, strict oversight of curriculum, student performance, governance, and capacity at virtual schools is essential, especially when the field seems to attract the attention of for-profit education management companies.

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The Greenfield public school system might have had the best of intentions four years ago when it contracted with K12 Inc., a Virginia-based for-profit firm, to operate a virtual school that would be open to students from across the state. Hometown school systems would cover the cost of tuition at Greenfield Commonwealth Virtual School at a per capita student rate of about \$6,000. But a recent program review by state officials confirmed deep-rooted problems, some as basic as a failure of the school to align its curriculum with that of the state.

State education officials aren't looking to disrupt the lives of the school's 720 students. But placing the school on probation sends a message that should be heard beyond Greenfield: Regulators will keep close tabs on progress at virtual schools, especially at those with private operators that might be tempted to increase profits by skimping on costs.

Cyber schools will still be given plenty of autonomy. What is expected in return is solid results on state assessment exams. The Greenfield virtual school fell way short of the mark, landing in the 7th percentile when compared with all middle/high and K-12 schools statewide. Equally disturbing, the state education team found minimal evidence of instruction that checked for student understanding. That reinforces concerns that virtual schools can't replicate the student-teacher relationship that is the heart of education.

Virtual schools may still have a role to play in educating specialized populations of students. But only if the operators take to heart the lesson that with great flexibility comes great responsibility.

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