

## Threatened With Closure, Virtual School Embraced Accountability, Fired Its For-Profit Manager and Made Dramatic Gains for Its 9,000 Students

Normally, when public charter schools seek to renew their charters — the legal documents that grant them permission to operate — the applications are dry as dust, heavy with bureaucratese intended to show compliance with sundry rules.

Contrast that with the petition Georgia Cyber Academy recently submitted in support of its charter renewal. To policy watchers who have been tracking efforts to hold accountable for-profit, online charter schools — among the most persistent underperformers — it's riveting reading.

Frustrated by years of failing grades on state school report cards and facing the threat of closure, Georgia Cyber Academy's nonprofit board of directors last spring wrested control of the school from publicly traded corporation K12 Inc. — the largest education management organization in the country — and instituted changes it had been unable to convince K12 to make. Since then, student academic growth has been swift, and the school's leaders are optimistic that the Georgia State Charter School Commission will grant a three-year renewal of their charter later this month.

Neither party will discuss the clash in depth because a dispute over the board's decision to sever its contracts with K12 Inc. is in closed-door arbitration. But the school's perhaps unprecedented petition accuses K12 of creating "artificial barriers and obstacles" to fulfilling the directives of the school's board, which was hamstrung by "a combination of misinformation, omitted/skewed data and lack of transparency as perpetrated by K12 Inc. and its employed district administrative leadership."

Coupled with minutes of three years of board meetings, the charter renewal petition provides possibly the most detailed look yet at the dynamics of a nonprofit school board's efforts to hold a for-profit management company accountable for student growth.

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The board eventually was forced to hire an outside auditor to assess what was happening in the school's virtual classrooms. It also hired an employee of its own "to act as the board's eyes, ears and voice at the school level." Mike Kooi's résumé includes stints in former Florida governor Jeb Bush's education department and as the education policy chief for the Florida House of Representatives. His findings, the charter petition notes, "validated the need for immediate and direct intervention."

A K12 spokesperson declined to address the petition's claims, citing the ongoing legal dispute. "While we cannot comment on the specifics of our ongoing dispute, we disagree with the statements made by the Georgia Cyber Academy in their recently filed application," a statement provided by the company said. "We look forward to disproving Georgia Cyber Academy's allegations in our arbitration case next month."

The arbitration is a contract dispute. But the charter renewal application brings up broader questions about the mechanics of holding virtual schools accountable for quality. Will the changes Georgia Cyber Academy has instituted yield lessons for other proponents of digital schooling?

In 2015, Stanford University's Center for Research on Education and Outcomes, or CREDO, found online schools to have an "overwhelming negative impact" on student academic growth. Students in digital schools, the researchers reported, were on average the equivalent of 180 school days behind their peers in traditional schools in math and 72 days behind in reading.

The findings jump-started a conversation about the schools among policymakers hoping to find a balance. On the one hand, virtual schools hold great promise for serving disparate groups of students with unique needs. On the other, in state after state, for-profit operators have used their political might to fend off standards and oversight.

As reported by The 74, efforts to close for-profit virtual charter schools or impose performance standards have met with pushback and political pressure. A 74 investigation last year revealed that a K12-linked parent group went after charter school oversight officials in three states, including Georgia, by accusing them of corruption after they sought tighter accountability.

When Georgia Cyber Academy's 9,000 students turned on their computers in preparation for the current academic year, many found themselves frozen out of their school portals. School leaders could not access crucial documents such as health records and special education plans. The arbiter handling the dispute ordered the computers turned back on temporarily and the records released.

The state's largest public school, Georgia Cyber Academy was run by K12 Inc. for its first decade. More than \$54 million of the \$94 million in state and federal funding the school received in 2018 was paid to K12, according to Kooi.

By law, charter schools must be constituted as nonprofit entities. Some states allow nonprofit boards to contract with for-profit companies to manage one or more aspects of a school's operation. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools estimates that 12 percent of charter schools are managed by for-profit businesses.

In Georgia Cyber Academy's case, until last spring, K12 provided everything from the phone numbers prospective parents could call for information to the online platforms that serve as virtual classrooms, as well as curriculum and student record-keeping. From 2007 until the past couple of years, this made the company

the board's chief source of information.

In 2017, the State Charter School Commission told the Georgia Cyber Academy board it would not renew the school's charter if performance didn't improve. According to minutes of the school board's public meetings, some of the state's student-performance data came as an unpleasant surprise.

"Board and staff clearly distressed over results" — specifically, a four-year graduation rate of 50 percent, the September 2017 minutes read. "Board expressed data surprises must stop. Data should be readily available, accurate and K12 needs to address disconnects immediately."

The board commissioned an independent audit of the school's operations and academic performance. Findings included a high student-teacher ratio, a large number of administrative tasks — including acclimating new students to virtual learning — assigned to teachers and a curriculum not aligned to state standards, according to a synopsis of events provided by the school.

In a nutshell, the churn of too many students enrolling and leaving on a rolling basis ate up teachers' time. "That's a high component of what the data told us," said Angela Lassetter, at that time a member of the school's board and now the head of school. "We needed to protect the teachers."

One of the board's first moves, minutes show, was to begin requiring most students to attend online classes in real time, which would mean smaller class sizes. Students with good performance could earn the right to play back lessons "on demand."

Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, has studied virtual schools. Her "strong sense" is that their administrators often rely on parents to oversee students, to irregular effect: "The last thing you want to do is throw them into their room and hope for the best."

Digital schools need safeguards to ensure that staff take action when students disengage. "Think of all the data they're collecting — everything is online, tests and quizzes," she said. "Are they progressing? Are they completing assignments?"

According to the August 2017 minutes, to implement the shift to live classes, school staff estimated they would need a significant number of new teachers. "K12 indicated funds were not available for the 85 additional teachers," the minutes state. "The Board requested that K12 provide further information regarding the actual cost of the 85 additional teachers."

While debate over fully staffing the school continued, the board was able to find money in its fiscal year 2018 budget to hire 18 new teachers and specialists and a half-time counselor. Filling those jobs, minutes of subsequent board meetings show, was a source of ongoing tension between the board and K12 Inc. administrators.

At the March 2018 meeting, board member Charlie Harper asked for the names of teachers hired for the 2017-18 school year. Harper, minutes show, "expressed concerns about getting clear answers as to the hiring of the teachers the board had negotiated with K12 in the fall." In particular, the board requested a written explanation why three prospective high school math teachers mentioned at the previous month's meeting had not been hired.

As it happened, as the staffing tussles were taking place, Georgia's state Board of Education adopted a rule requiring charter school boards to be the employer of all school staff, with the exception of instructional leaders, whom the board could decide to employ or continue using on a contract basis. Subsequently, the board accepted the resignation of one of its members, Lassetter, whom it immediately hired as the new head of school, a position equivalent to a traditional district superintendent.

Lassetter began collecting and analyzing data that exposed major issues with the high student turnover that's common in virtual schools. She instituted an assessment that pinpoints students' missing academic skills, so teachers could address them. She also raised salaries and, with board approval, set an enrollment cutoff date for new students and capped new enrollment at 20 percent of students for each grade.

In addition to teachers, Lassetter hired staff to fill a number of support roles, including behavior interventionists, academic coaches and assistant principals. Family liaisons, for example, form relationships with students and parents that are intended to last the duration of a family's tenure with the school.

“A lot of these children are disenchanted with education,” she explained in an interview with The 74. “There’s no trust there. Now we have 78 people that I hired who do nothing but that: build relationships with families.”

As new strategies were implemented, Kooi said, staff concluded that the K12 Inc. curriculum in use was neither competitively priced nor well aligned with Georgia academic standards — a contention K12 Inc. had previously disputed vigorously to The 74, insisting it had proved the materials' alignment to Georgia education officials.

During the 2018-19 academic year, board minutes show in great detail, school staff first supplemented and then replaced K12 Inc. classroom materials. With both attendance and engagement monitored, live class participation doubled instantly. Test scores immediately began to rise — as did withdrawal rates as students who were chronically absent or not completing assignments left.

The board and staff also discussed potential financial savings from changing curriculum providers. At the May meeting, for example, staff reported to the board that replacing the existing social studies curriculum in grades 3 through 8 with one called Gallopade was behind a 20 percent increase in student performance in the second half of the year. Its permanent adoption would save \$400 per student.

Last year, according to the charter renewal application, the shift away from K12 Inc. curriculum saved the school \$18 million.

<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6256505/SCSC-Performance-Review-Presentation-18-19.pdf> SCSC Performance Review Presentation 18 19 Georgia Cyber Academy (PDF)

<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/6256505/SCSC-Performance-Review-Presentation-18-19.txt> SCSC Performance Review Presentation 18 19 Georgia Cyber Academy (Text)

When the state released its 2018-19 school performance numbers last fall, Georgia Cyber Academy got good news. Georgia's College and Career Ready Performance Index is a 100-point composite of student proficiency, progress, gap closure, readiness and, in the case of high schools, graduation rates.

For the first time, Georgia Cyber Academy's middle school exceeded the state average of 72, posting a 74.7. The elementary program scored a 68, 11 points below the state average but 11 points higher than the year before. The high school scored a 64, well below the state average of 77 but six points higher than in 2017-18.

School leaders were especially proud of their gap-closure scores. The elementary school score more than doubled, rising from 41 to 85. Middle school rose from 41 to 85, and high school from 47 to 87.

A memo K12 provided to The 74 during the reporting for an earlier story asserted that "recent academic improvement at GCA can be directly tied to the continued usage of K12 curriculum."

No longer a member of the school's board, Harper said credit for the school's progress should also accrue to the school's charter authorizer. Even as the State Charter School Commission raised standards and refused to budge on compliance, the agency's staff spent lots of time making sure that virtual schools' unique challenges — such as a high student attrition rate — were taken into account as evaluations were created.

"They constantly tweak or review their framework," he said. "They don't look at it as a static document."

Lake, too, praised the authorizing agency. "The main thing is they took action, and that's not something other states have been able to do because of K12's lobbying prowess," she said. "They seem to have worked toward solutions that work for kids who need an online option."

Whether the authorizing board is satisfied enough with the school's progress to renew its charter for three years remains to be seen. The board will take up the petition at a meeting Feb. 26.

"While we recognize that online education may not be the best option for many students in our state, it is clearly the best option for a significant minority of students and therefore should be preserved," the school's application states. "We are confident that the changes we are making, as referenced above, will allow [Georgia Cyber Academy] to be an effective option to meet that need and to eventually become a virtual education model for the nation."