



## Special Bulletin on Virtual Charter Schools (Excerpts 3/9/02)

### Your Action Needed to Counter Virtual Charter Schools

Two proposed virtual (or cyber) charter schools are currently seeking charters from Wisconsin school districts. Granting a charter to either would undermine both public schools and our homeschooling freedoms. It would be much easier and better to prevent the schools from being chartered in the first place than to try to minimize the damage they do once they are chartered. We homeschoolers have just done very important work in being the first and nearly the only people to gather information and inform others. We need to continue. The highest priority is to get public school people involved. (Even though there have been and continue to be strong points of disagreement between public schoolers and homeschoolers, here is an issue on which we can agree.) Opposition only from homeschoolers is highly unlikely to prevent charters from being granted. Suggestions are under "What We Can Do" below.

Key votes are scheduled for Monday, March 11 and Friday, March 15, so the more we can do before those dates, the better, although action after those dates will still be very important. Final votes are tentatively scheduled for March 25 in Appleton and April 8 in Lake Mills. And this issue will be with us after that.

### Background

The two proposed virtual charter schools are:

**(1) Wisconsin Connections Academy (WCA):** Sylvan Ventures (part of Sylvan Learning, a corporation focused on profiting from public and private education) is seeking a charter from the Appleton Area School District to open WCA offering grades K-8 in the fall of 2002. A committee of the Appleton School Board is scheduled to vote on Friday, March 15 on whether to recommend that the school board grant the charter.

**(2) Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WVA):** At the same time but separately, WVA is seeking a charter from the Lake Mills School Board for a virtual charter school to open in the fall of 2002 for grades K-5. WVA would get its curriculum and software and possibly its computers from K12, an online school. The Lake Mills School Board is scheduled to act on this request on Monday, March 11.

### Important New Information

Here is information WPA has gathered since the Special Bulletin dated 1/22/02. (If you need a copy, visit WPA's web site at [www.homeschooling-wpa.org](http://www.homeschooling-wpa.org) and click on "Issues and Legislation" or call the WPA voice mail at 608-283-3131 to request a hard copy.)

• **Homeschoolers working through WPA have accomplished a lot.** We were instrumental in getting 800 people to attend WCA's open houses, the vast majority opposed to virtual charter schools. They asked very good questions, got important information, and educated the general public. As a matter of principle, many resisted WCA's enticement to give their names in exchange for a \$50 gift certificate for amazon.com. As at least one person put it, "Do you think you can get me to change how I educate my children with a \$50 gift certificate?" Another parent said, "The presenter made the program look easy and very tempting, but I left saying to myself, 'I'm going to buy my own computer if I really need one.'"

Thank you to all who attended, asked questions, and took a stand. Our efforts are starting to pay off as public policy makers and public school people are getting involved and raising concerns.

• **WCA got the names, addresses, and phone numbers of most of the homeschoolers it contacted through Tri-Media Marketing Services.** To find out if Tri-Media has your name on its list and/or if to have your name taken off its list, call them at 1-800-874-4062 extension 110 and ask for Michelle.

• **Sylvan Connections Academies like WCA have not been granted charters in any state or school district where they have applied** and have been rejected in Denver (Colorado), Massachusetts, North Carolina, and twice in Minnesota. In February, 2002, the DPI turned down a WCA subgrant application.

In addition, new virtual charter schools run by other corporations in Ohio and Pennsylvania (including at least one associated with K12) are causing numerous problems and generating lawsuits. In Pennsylvania, more than 200 of the 501 school districts are refusing to pay the district that granted the charter for the largest virtual school with 2,700 students.

In Ohio, a major audit identified numerous administrative and financial problems with virtual charter schools. Also, a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of virtual charter schools has been brought by the teachers union, other school employees unions, the Ohio Association of PTAs, the League of Women Voters, and the Buckeye Association of School Administrators.

• **WCA has shown itself to be unworthy of public trust and public funds.** Promoters of WCA repeatedly presented misleading and inaccurate information during the open houses and in writing in other states. For example, David Benoit, Executive Vice President of Sylvan Ventures, was asked by the Denver (Colorado) School Board about the number of hours of direct instruction. He wrote, "Over the course of the 180-day academic year, New Connections Academy students will be expected to document a [sic] 6 to 8 hours per day of engaged time." He added, "(NCA [New Connections Academy] will track this engaged time through its technology-based curriculum management system.)" However, when he was asked the same question during a WCA open house, Benoit said that parents didn't need to worry about the hours, that Sylvan was interested in performance, not hours.

During WCA open houses and again during an interview on Milwaukee Public Television, Pat Laystrom, Education Consultant and Project Manager for WCA, was asked how much time students would need to spend on direct instruction via their computer. She consistently replied, "Minimal," although she also sometimes admitted that kindergartners would need to spend 2 1/2 hours and older students more. Many people do not feel this is minimal, especially considering the potential for physical, mental, and emotional damage from computer use, especially by young children.

Although WCA's Planning Phase grant proposal clearly indicates that they were planning to market to public school students as well as homeschoolers, WCA actually limited its marketing primarily to homeschoolers. When asked why the school districts in which open houses were held were not notified, Laystrom said there wasn't enough time. However, there had been plenty of time to use telemarketing and direct mail to target homeschoolers. Perhaps the difficulties virtual charter schools were encountering in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina influenced WCA's decision to market primarily to homeschoolers in Wisconsin.

Marketers for WCA repeatedly claimed that WCA was non-profit. While this is technically true, it is misleading. When asked by the Denver School District to identify the charter school's relation to Sylvan Learning, Benoit wrote, "The corporate entity directly involved with New Connections Academy is Sylvan Ventures, the founding investor of the Virtual School Company of which New Connections Academy in Colorado is a wholly owned subsidiary. This Virtual School Company provides all of the educational and operational services delivered by New Connections Academy in Colorado." He also wrote, "The Sylvan Ventures Virtual School Company corporate board will

be the legal board governing New Connections Academy operations. The corporate board will be guided by a Colorado-based Advisory Board of Directors." Presumably, Sylvan would have the same type of control over WCA, meaning that WCA would really be run by the for-profit Sylvan Ventures. (See WPA's web site for the full text of "New Connections Academy Questions and Answers re: Charter School Application 10/25/01")

• **Sylvan Academies like WCA clearly intend to bring homeschoolers into the public school system.** Benoit wrote that New Connections Academy in Denver would work "in collaboration with a coalition of Front Range superintendents. . . To recapture student enrollment being lost to home schools, private schools, and out-of-district charters."

• **Both Appleton and Lake Mills School Districts have apparently violated the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act.** (See WPA handbook, p. 182) Appleton has already released to WCA and Lake Mills to WVA personal information from or copies of the DPI Open Enrollment forms that families had submitted to them, even though neither WCA nor WVA has been chartered. This indicates the extent to which the corporations, and not the school districts, would run these schools if they were chartered.