

BILL ANALYSIS

C.S.H.B. 1554
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Public Education
Committee Report (Substituted)

BACKGROUND

Some parents have left the public school system but would return to public education if they were offered the support of a content rich curriculum, adaptive lessons, and certified teachers without losing the flexibility of home-based learning. Changing family circumstances cause many children to move frequently, disrupting the continuity of their learning. Gifted and talented students possess the ability to explore topics in great depth, as long as there is compelling and interesting material at their fingertips. Conversely, some students get lost in the shuffle of large class sizes and would benefit from a program that tracks their progress more closely and provides them with individualized instruction. Also, some children are engaged in other productive endeavors that make it difficult for them to attend class during regular school hours.

Virtual charter schools utilize technology to deliver a significant portion of instruction through the Internet or in a virtual or remote setting. Virtual charter schools allow students to work at an individualized pace that does not prohibit any student from working at a different grade level in any subject.

PURPOSE

C.S.H.B. 1554 permits the establishment and operation of virtual charter schools by colleges or universities in order to offer students greater educational flexibility.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the commissioner of education in SECTION 2 (Section 12.153, Education Code) of this bill.

ANALYSIS

C.S.H.B. 1554 amends the Education Code by adding to the list of the classes of charters a college or university charter. The bill defines a virtual charter school as a charter school that uses technology, including the Internet, to deliver a significant portion of the school's instruction outside of a central campus.

The bill authorizes the State Board of Education to grant a charter for a virtual charter school administered by a public senior college or university to operate from an administrative office in the same county in which the campus of the college or university is located.

The bill requires the commissioner of education (commissioner) to adopt rules to administer virtual charter schools and to determine the number of hours of virtual charter school educational activities that are the equivalent of one day of school attendance for purposes of charter school funding.

The bill sets forth requirements of virtual charter schools including:

- providing each student with access to a secular curriculum that meets or exceeds state academic standards

- allowing each student to work at a grade level other than the grade level in which the student is enrolled
- assessing each student's performance in each subject in the foundation curriculum in which the student is enrolled an average of at least once each week during the school year
- ensuring that a parent or legal guardian of each student verifies the number of hours of educational activities completed by the student each school year
- making available to the parent or legal guardian of each student a computer and printer, physical copies of any instructional materials related to the student's curriculum, and reimbursement for any fees related to Internet access used for educational activities
- maintaining a student/teacher ratio of not less than one teacher for each 60 students in average daily attendance.

The bill requires a virtual charter school student to complete at least 720 hours of educational activities each school year in grade two or lower and at least 900 hours in grade three or higher. The bill requires virtual charter school teachers to be appropriately certified and be available to meet with the parent of each student enrolled in the teacher's class at least four times each school year.

The bill provides that a virtual charter school is entitled, for each student in average daily attendance, to funding at a level equal to an open-enrollment charter school. The bill requires a public senior college or university that holds a charter for a virtual charter school to conduct an annual evaluation of the school.

EFFECTIVE DATE

Upon passage, or, if the Act does not receive the necessary vote, the Act takes effect September 1, 2003.

COMPARISON OF ORIGINAL TO SUBSTITUTE

C.S.H.B. 1554 modifies the original version by requiring a virtual charter school to assess each student's performance an average of at least once each week during the school year.