

Ohio E-Schools: Learning From Their Experience

By Bill Tucker, Erin Dillon, and Padmini Jambulapati

While online learning is still new to the vast majority of K-12 students and schools, Ohio has operated “e-schools,” public charter schools that operate entirely online and which students “attend” on a full-time basis, for a decade. As policy debates around online learning grow, what do we know about these schools—whom do they enroll and how well do they perform—and what can we learn from Ohio’s e-school experience? Our analysts answered these questions and more on our blog, “The Quick & the Ed.” Here’s what they had to say.

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Part I: Learning From Data on Ohio E-Schools

By Bill Tucker • May 2, 2011

In 2001, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), Ohio’s first charter “e-school,” opened its doors. Soon there were 27 e-schools across the state. And, despite a moratorium that has prevented any new schools from opening since 2005, total e-school enrollment has skyrocketed to over 29,000 students. (See Chart 1.)

E-schools are publicly funded—they receive the same base per-pupil amount from the state as brick-and-mortar charter schools (\$5,718 in 2010)—but are run by a variety of different organizations, including traditional school districts, nonprofit consortia, and

also national for-profit companies like K12, Inc.¹ While e-school students take their courses via the computer, the curriculum might also include physical textbooks, live video lessons, and online discussions with teachers and classmates.

Critics fear that students fail to develop social skills and real world survival abilities, missing out on important aspects of a traditional education such as peer interaction and collaboration. But, e-schools have proven popular among students and parents in Ohio, which e-school advocates attribute to the increased flexibility they offer, both in scheduling and in the pace at which students move through the curriculum.

Chart 1. Virtual Enrollment

Online charter schools have added more than 9,000 students to their rolls since the state imposed a moratorium on new schools before the 2005-06 school year. Schools are listed by size.

SCHOOL	COUNTY	2005-06	2009-10
Electronic Classroom Of Tomorrow	Statewide	6,664	9,257
Ohio Virtual Academy	Statewide	3,101	7,687
Ohio Connections Academy	Statewide	768	2,081
Ohio Distance and Electronic Learning Academy	Statewide	3,955	1,709
Treca Digital Academy	Statewide	1,377	1,690
Buckeye On-Line School for Success	Statewide	658	1,660
Virtual Community School Of Ohio	Statewide	1,165	1,419
Akron Digital Academy	Summit	639	734
Goal Digital Academy	Morrow	79	352
Quaker Digital Academy	Tuscarawas	121	341
London Academy	Madison	122	341
Warren County Virtual Community School	Warren	76	268
Newark Digital Academy	Licking	60	192
Mahoning Unlimited Classroom	Mahoning	216	176
Marion City Digital Academy	Marion	122	152
Fairborn Digital Academy	Greene	63	146
Findlay Digital Academy	Hancock	98	122
West Central Learning Academy II	Allen	98	119
Lorain High School Digital	Lorain	81	109
Lancaster Digital Academy	Fairfield	37	85
Massillon Digital Academy	Stark	55	79
Auglaize County Educational Academy	Allen	76	68
Cardington Lincoln Local Digital Academy	Morrow	19	57
Lakewood Digital Academy	Licking	62	52
Graham Digital Academy	Champaign	50	42
Southwest Licking Digital Academy	Licking	50	40
Kent Digital Academy	Portage	25	26
Total charter e-schools		19,897	29,094

Source: Ohio Department of Education THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Source: The Columbus Dispatch using Ohio Dept. of Education data.

As in all Ohio public schools, e-school students take regular state-mandated tests, and e-schools are rated under the state’s accountability system. According to Ohio’s rating system, only three of Ohio’s 27 e-schools were rated “Effective” or “Excellent” in the 2009–10 school year.

But, these composite data mask significant differences among schools. When taken as a whole, they paint a picture of a highly varied set of schools with large differences in students, enrollment patterns, and most importantly, performance (similar to the wide variations found in brick-and-mortar schools). Two of the highest performing schools, Ohio Connections Academy and Fairborn Digital Academy, are markedly different in size (2,081 and 46 students respectively), enrollment patterns (statewide vs. district), and management (private vs. district). And, there are poor performers of all stripes and types, too.

Note

1. While e-schools receive state funds, they do not necessarily receive local funds, leading to significantly less spending than traditional district schools. According to the most recent data available from the Ohio Department of Education, in fiscal year 2010 Ohio school districts spent just over \$10,500 per pupil on operating expenditures (includes both state and local funds).

Part II: Ohio's 'Statewide' E-Schools

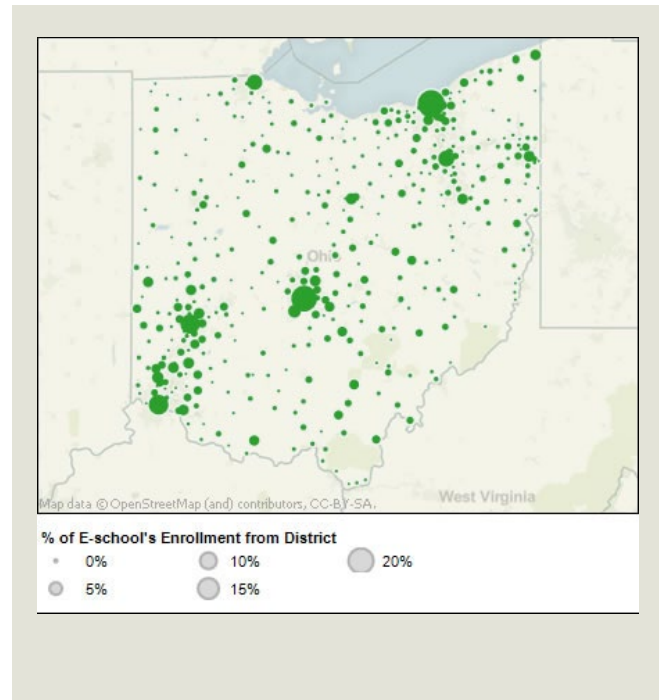
By Padmini Jambulapati and Erin Dillon • May 3, 2011

Today, we take a look at Ohio's "statewide" e-schools, which, as their name suggests, enroll students from across the state. Ohio's statewide e-school operators are the biggest players on the e-school scene in terms of student enrollment, which ranges from 1,400 students at the Virtual Community School of Ohio to over 9,000 students enrolled in the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow. Only seven of Ohio's 27 e-schools are considered "statewide," but taken together they enroll nearly 90 percent of all e-school students.

Using data from the Ohio Department of Education, we've mapped where each e-school is getting its students and the percent of each e-school's enrollment coming from each school district.¹ Map 1, for example, shows the distribution of students enrolled in Ohio Connections Academy during the 2009–10 school year.

The only e-school rated "Excellent" by the state, Ohio Connections enrolls students from 74 percent of Ohio's 611 school districts. Each dot on the map indicates an Ohio school district that Ohio Connections draws from, and the size of the dot represents the percent of Ohio Connections' total enrollment coming from that school district. Ohio Connections draws the largest percent of its enrollment from, as one might expect, Ohio's population centers—almost 5 percent of Ohio Connections' enrollment comes from Cleveland, located at the top of the state along Lake Erie, and another 4 percent comes from Columbus, located in the middle of the state. Map 1A shows all seven of Ohio's "statewide" e-schools. The dots for each school are color-coded according to that school's state performance rating.² As the map shows, the performance of Ohio's statewide e-schools covers a wide range. The green dots, for example, represent Ohio Connections Academy, which rates "Excellent." The red dots, on the other hand, represent OHDELA (Ohio Distance & Electronic Learning Academy) and the Buckeye Online School for Success, both of which were rated "Academic Watch" by the state in 2009–10. Most of Ohio's statewide e-schools fall in

Map 1. Ohio Connections 2009–2010



Map 1A. Ohio's Statewide E-Schools, 2009–2010

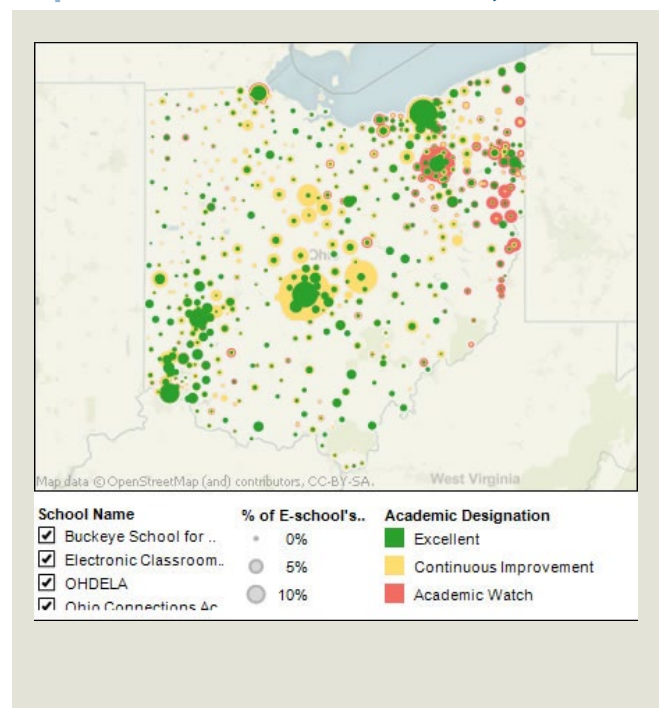


Chart 2. Who Operates Statewide Schools?

School Name	Operator	For Profit?	Information
Ohio Connections Academy	Connections Education™, LLC.	YES	Operates schools in 22 states, including Idaho, Colorado, and Pennsylvania
Ohio Virtual Academy	K12 Inc.	YES	Operates schools in 29 states, including Nevada and Oregon, and the District of Columbia
OHDELA (Ohio Distance and Electronic Learning Academy)	White Hat Management	YES	Operates 40 charter schools in 6 states, including an e-school in Pennsylvania. In addition to e-schools, the Akron-based management company also operates HOPE Academies (brick-and-mortar K-8 charter schools) and LifeSkills Centers (alternative education charter schools)
Buckeye Online School for Success (BOSS)	Self-managed	NO	Partners with the National Network of Digital Schools, a nonprofit education management foundation
Virtual Community School of Ohio	Self-managed	NO	Serves K-12 students throughout Ohio
Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT)	Altair learning management	YES	Serving K-12 students, ECOT is the largest e-school in Ohio
TRECA Digital Academy	Tri-Rivers Educational Computer Association (TRECA)	NO	TRECA also runs a consortium of 40 Ohio school districts that provide curriculum and hardware to support district e-schools along with its own K-12 e-school

View an [interactive version](#) of this chart online.

the middle under “Continuous Improvement” and are colored yellow on the map.

So who operates these statewide schools? Four are operated by the type of providers—national, for-profit—that tend to dominate discussions and policy decisions about online learning. The other three are nonprofit organizations that manage their own operations. (See Chart 2.)

TRECA Digital Academy, for example, was started by the Tri-Rivers Educational Computer Association (TRECA), a consortium of over 40 Ohio school districts. TRECA entered the Ohio e-school world early on by encouraging school districts to establish their own, local e-schools to compete with the statewide e-schools, which were seen as taking away student enrollments and dollars. TRECA helped districts to set up their e-schools and still provides management assistance for many of the small, local e-schools in Ohio.

TRECA Digital Academy is also unusual in that it is the only statewide e-school designated as a drop-out prevention and recovery school, which means that a majority of its students are served through a drop-out prevention program. This designation comes with a nice perk: TRECA Digital Academy is eligible for a

“school closure waiver,” meaning that, unlike other charter schools in Ohio, it is not subject to automatic closure after multiple years of very low performance and little academic growth. This leaves TRECA’s sponsor, Tri-Rivers, solely responsible for shutting down the school in the case of consistently low performance.

While TRECA Digital Academy may be the only e-school with this designation among the statewide schools, it is not as unusual among the smaller e-schools in Ohio. Tomorrow, we’ll describe the nine Ohio e-schools we’ve categorized as “regional”—these schools have historically put geographic restrictions on enrollment, limiting where they get their students, but some have recently lifted these restrictions and seem to have ambitions to go statewide.

Notes

1. Data is from the Ohio Department of Education’s FY2010 Community Schools Settlement Report. This report provides the number of full-time equivalent students each school district sent to each e-school. We calculated the percent of e-school students coming from each district for a particular e-school by dividing the number of FTE students a district sent to that e-school by the total FTE enrollment in the

e-school. We then mapped the percent of students coming from each district using the district zip codes.

- Ohio's school performance ratings are based on four measures of performance: the percent of students scoring proficient on state assessments, a value-added measure

that assesses whether students made at least one year of academic progress, whether the school made 'adequate yearly progress' under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and a performance index that rewards schools for students scoring above proficient.

Part III: Ohio's 'Regional' E-Schools

By Padmini Jambulapati and Erin Dillon • May 4, 2011

Yesterday, we looked at Ohio's seven "statewide" e-schools, which draw students from nearly all of Ohio's 611 districts. These statewide schools are probably what many people think of when they think of e-school operators: they're big, with the largest—ECOT—enrolling over 9,000 students; four of the seven are managed by national, for-profit companies (the other three are self-governed nonprofit organizations); and they're truly virtual, drawing students from all over Ohio without regard to district boundaries. In terms of performance, statewide e-schools range from the best rated e-school in the state, Ohio Connections Academy, to two schools rated as "Academic Watch," the second lowest rating in the state.

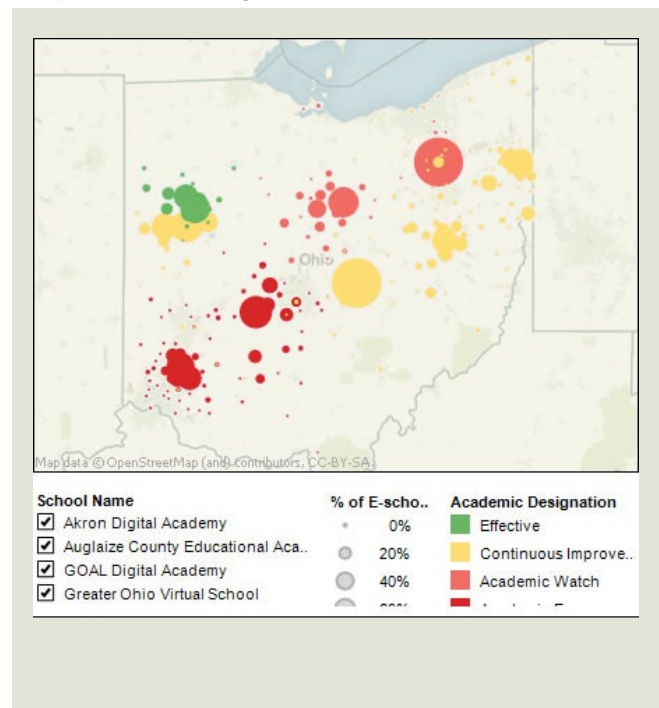
But the statewide e-schools only account for seven of Ohio's 27 e-schools—the other 20 look pretty different from the statewide schools in enrollment and management. Map 2 shows the distribution of enrollment in nine of the 20 remaining e-schools, a group we're calling "regional" e-schools. Unlike the statewide schools, these schools draw students from only a limited number of Ohio districts (ranging from 11 districts for Newark Digital Academy to 72 for Quaker Digital Academy). In contrast, Ohio's statewide schools each draw from well over 300 districts.

Like Map 1A of the statewide schools, Map 2 shows where each e-school is getting its students. Each dot is a district that sends students to a particular e-school, and the size of the dot represents the percent of the e-school's enrollment coming from that district. There may be overlapping dots where a district sends students to multiple e-schools. The dots are color-coded according to each school's performance, so there are two schools that are rated "Academic Emergency"—these are both colored dark

red. On the other hand, there's only one school rated "Effective," and this school is colored light green.

While virtual school proponents often argue that online education can finally eliminate the link between a student's zip code and the quality of his or her education options, Ohio's regional e-schools tell a slightly different story. As the map shows, these schools tend to draw from a handful of surrounding school districts as a result of geographic restrictions put in place by the school. West Central Learning Academy, for example, the only one of this group to receive an "Effective" rating from the state, limits enrollment to a 50-mile radius around its main office in Lima, Ohio. Other regional e-schools, like Quaker

Map 2. Ohio's Regional E-Schools, 2009–2010



Digital Academy, recently lifted the geographic restriction on enrollment and are now eligible to enroll students statewide.

While Ohio's statewide e-schools are sponsored (the Ohio term for approving and monitoring a charter school) by a mix of local districts and statewide sponsors like the Ohio Council of Community Schools, the regional schools are all sponsored by a local district or regional "educational service center." This has important implications for the accountability at some of these e-schools. As we described yesterday, the statewide TRECA Digital Academy is designated as a drop-out prevention and recovery school, which allows it to receive a waiver that protects it from state-mandated closure due to low-performance. Six of the regional e-schools, including the four e-schools receiving the state's lowest performance ratings—Akron Digital Academy, GOAL Digital Academy, London Digital Academy, and the Greater Ohio Virtual School—qualify for the same waiver.

In addition to the e-school waiver, local school districts that authorize a drop-out prevention and recovery e-school can apply to the state to exclude that school's performance data from the district's report card. Most districts must include performance data from the charter schools they sponsor in the district report card, thereby holding districts responsible for the performance of charter schools they approve and oversee. But this doesn't apply to schools that qualify as drop-out prevention and recovery schools.

The combination of these two exceptions—the e-school waiver from automatic closure and the district's exemption—means that for the three regional e-schools that are authorized by their local district and considered drop-out recovery schools (London Academy, Quaker Digital Academy, and the Greater Ohio Virtual School), there is little accountability for performance, both from the state and their local district authorizer. This waiver system also creates some odd incentives for districts—they can shuffle lower performing students to the local e-school and get them off the district's report card. This would improve the district's performance while placing little performance pressure on the e-school.

Some of these "regional" e-schools appear to have ambitions to become statewide by lifting geographic restrictions on enrollment. Because of Ohio's moratorium on new e-school operators, the expansion of existing regional e-schools is where Ohio students are most likely to find new e-school options. Quaker Digital Academy has already formally switched to being a statewide school, and the websites of many of the other regional e-schools indicate that students from across the state can enroll. But is this a good expansion of school choice for Ohio's students?

The performance of regional e-schools, based on their 2009–10 state ratings, is underwhelming. And perhaps most concerning is that many of these schools aren't facing rigorous accountability for their performance, thanks to the waivers described above. There's little currently holding back a low-performing school from dramatically expanding enrollments without first showing that they can serve those students well.

Part IV: Ohio's 'Local' E-Schools

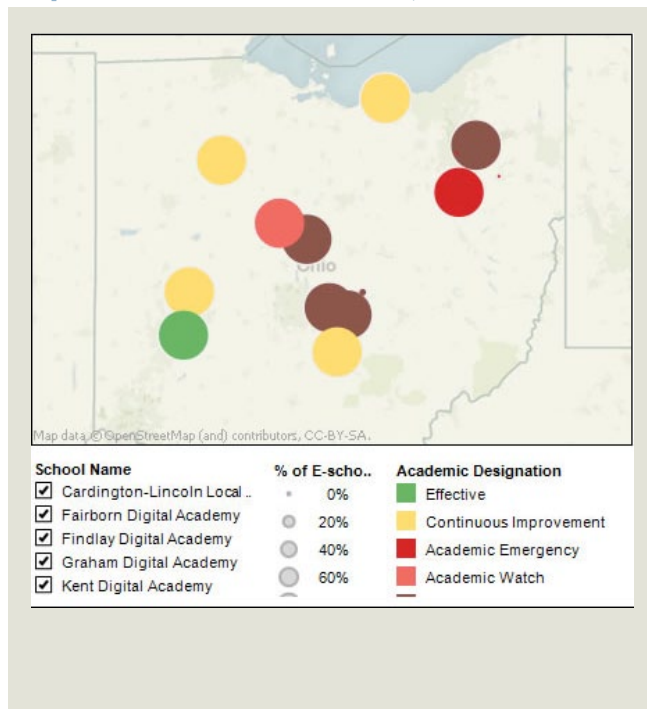
By Padmini Jambulapati and Erin Dillon • May 5, 2011

For the past two days we've presented maps showing where Ohio's e-schools are getting their students. First, we looked at "statewide" e-schools, which enroll students from hundreds of different school districts in Ohio. Next we looked at a group of schools we call "regional" e-schools because they draw students from only a handful of districts in one area of the state. Today, in our third and final map, we look at a group of schools we're calling "local" e-schools. Despite their

status as virtual schools, these e-schools enroll 100 percent (or almost 100 percent) of their students from their host district. Collectively, these 11 schools serve just 910 students—3 percent of Ohio's total e-school enrollment, with individual school enrollment ranging from 26 to 152.

Map 3 below shows where each local e-school is getting its students. Each dot is a district that sends

Map 3. Ohio's Local E-Schools, 2009–2010



students to a particular e-school, and the size of the dot represents the percent of the e-school's enrollment coming from that district. Unlike yesterday's or Tuesday's maps, this map shows at most three dots for each school because these schools draw almost all of their students from just one district—the sponsoring school district. The dots are color-coded according to each school's performance, with brown dots indicating schools that were unrated by the state because of low enrollment.

Local districts opened many of Ohio's local and regional e-schools in an attempt to keep students from leaving the district and taking their per-pupil funds with them. When e-schools first appeared in Ohio, a consortium of Ohio public school districts called TRECA (which now operates the statewide TRECA Digital Academy) encouraged districts to start their own e-schools to compete with the statewide operators, and provided help to districts in starting and operating the schools. All but one (Massillon Digital Academy) continue to partner with TRECA for curriculum, instruction, and technical support. While on paper these schools may be local e-schools,

drawing nearly 100 percent of their enrollment from one district, in practice their operations are similar to the larger regional and statewide schools that contract e-school management to an outside company.

Yesterday, we described the combination of waivers and exemptions in Ohio state law that allows e-schools that are designated as drop-out prevention and recovery schools and are sponsored by a local school district to avoid some of Ohio's accountability requirements, including mandatory closure for persistent low performance and accountability for the sponsoring district. Seven of the local e-schools fall into this category, creating a potential accountability shelter for these schools.

In contrast, accountability for e-schools that are not charter schools is more straightforward. Much like the local charter e-schools, these schools enroll students from their host district and many partner with TRECA for curriculum, instruction, and operational support. But because these e-schools remain part of the host district, the district is held accountable for the performance of all the students enrolled in the e-schools.

Not so for e-schools that have charter school status. These e-schools are technically a separate entity from their host district. Therefore, the sponsoring district may be exempted from being accountable for their performance. Most disturbing is that this exemption is specifically targeted to schools serving students at risk of dropping out, and therefore most in need of a high-quality education. As Paul Hill said in a recent *Education Next* article on online learning, when it comes to holding online schools accountable for quality, "Almost every party involved with a poor kid who is about to drop out of school doesn't want to turn that rock over."¹ The waivers and exemptions in Ohio make it easier for districts, the state, and e-school sponsors to not turn over rocks.

Note

1. Erin Dillon and Bill Tucker, "Lessons for Online Learning," *Education Next* 11:2, Spring 2011.

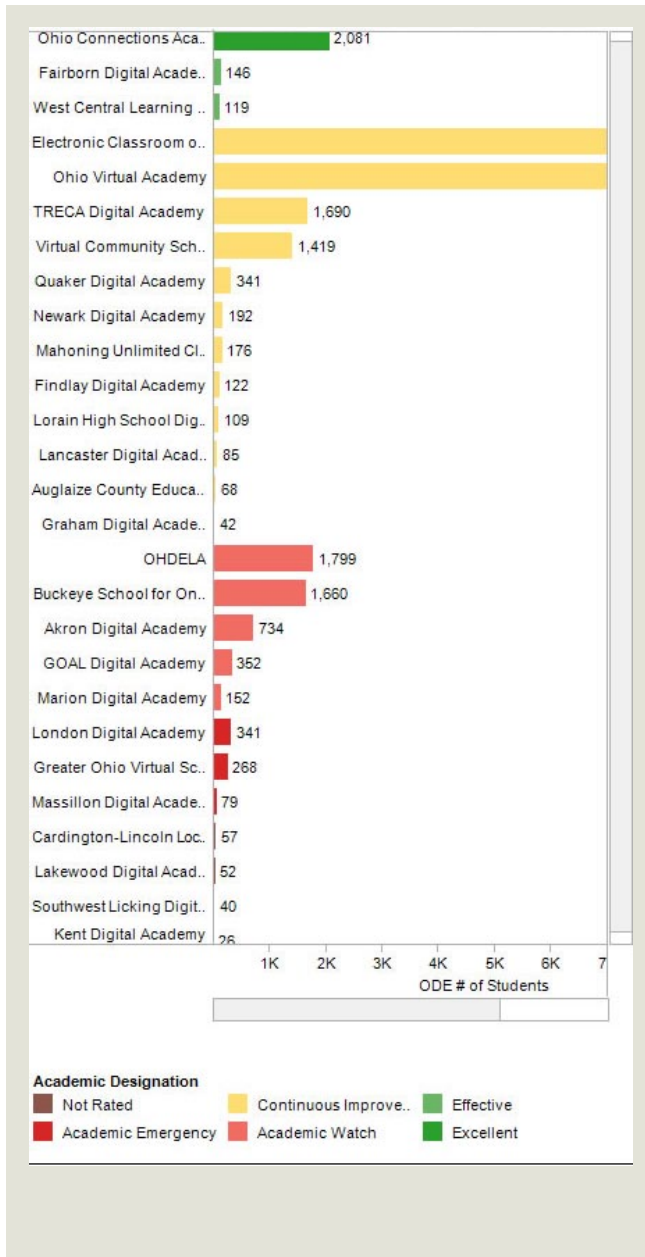
Part V: Does Size Determine E-School Performance?

By Bill Tucker • May 6, 2011

For policymakers looking to rein in the growth of online learning, capping a school's enrollment seems like a logical option. For example, in Massachusetts, lawmakers restricted online schools to no more than 500 students. Yet, in Ohio, the size

of the e-school does not appear to determine the school's actual performance. Chart 3 shows the enrollment size of each e-school in Ohio, along with the school's state academic performance rating, ranging from "Excellent" (dark green) and "Effective" (light green) for the higher performing schools to "Academic Watch" (light red) and "Academic Emergency" (dark red) for the lower performing schools.

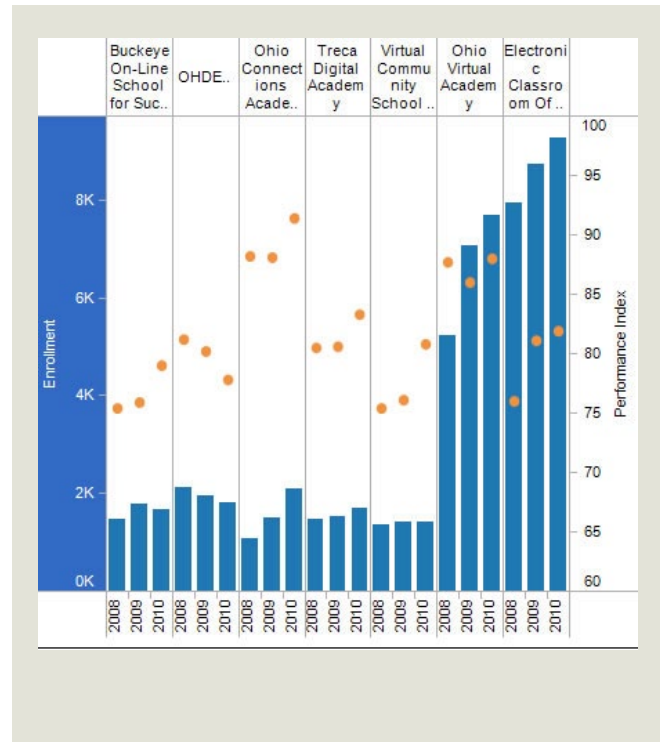
Chart 3. Ohio E-School Enrollment and State Performance Rating



In Ohio, caps on e-school enrollment could backfire. For example, an enrollment cap of 2,000 students would restrict a higher-performing school, such as Ohio's Connections Academy, forcing students to lower-performing schools.

But, while one year of Ohio performance index data show that a school's enrollment does not determine performance, we wondered how a school's growth over time might impact performance. For example, did the largest e-schools perform better several years ago

Chart 4. Statewide E-Schools, Growth and Performance



when many were smaller? Does performance decline as a school grows? And, do high-performing schools grow faster than lower-performing schools?

To test these ideas, we pulled three years of performance and enrollment data for each of the seven statewide schools, the largest of Ohio's e-schools. In Chart 4, each school's performance is represented by the orange dots, which correspond to the scale on the right axis. The blue bars represent each school's enrollment and correspond to the scale on the left axis. For example, ECOT, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, listed on the right, has improved its performance index and also grown its enrollment over the past three years.

While these data tell us that neither growth nor absolute school size are determinant of school performance, they also raise many other interesting questions. The data don't tell us about the composition of the growth/declines in student enrollment. For example, OHDELA, the only statewide

school that is losing enrollment, is also falling in performance. In OHDELA's case, is the school losing students because it is performing poorly or is it performing poorly because higher-performing students are leaving (or perhaps a death cycle of both)? Likewise, we don't know what is causing ECOT's higher performance.

These data also raise questions about the efficacy of the e-school "market" in Ohio. Particularly for the statewide schools, where families have free choice among all seven and geography is not a limiting factor, why do families make the choices that they do—especially since there are large gaps in performance across the schools. Perhaps families are expressing a preference for specific programs or many of the other desired outcomes of school that aren't reflected in Ohio's performance index. But, it's also likely that the information available to families is limited and, as we've seen in many other educational contexts, choice on its own is not enough.

Part VI: Who Are Ohio E-School Students?

By Padmini Jambulapati and Erin Dillon • May 9, 2011

Last week, we presented maps that showed where Ohio's e-schools are getting their students, but who are these students? This week we'll be taking a closer look at the 29,000 students who attend e-schools and how long they stay in those schools. Today, we present three charts with demographic information about each of Ohio's 27 e-schools. We found that there's a large amount of variation that might defy what many think the average e-school student looks like in Ohio—and challenges the notion that there is an "average" e-school student in the first place.

Chart 5 takes a look at the percent of students with disabilities that are enrolled in Ohio's e-schools (e-schools not shown are missing data). Online learning provides a unique opportunity for students with disabilities and, with parental support, these students can thrive in the self-paced and individualized learning environment it offers. Compared to Ohio's average (red bar), most of the statewide e-schools' special education enrollment

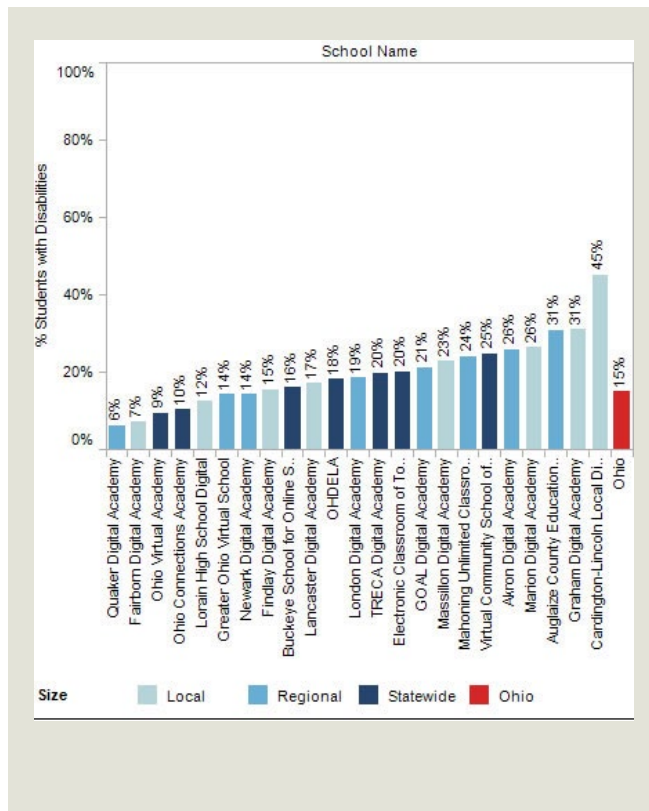
(dark blue bars) are within 5 percent of the state average. The exceptions are the Virtual Community School of Ohio, which enrolls 10 percent more than the state average, and Ohio Virtual Academy, which enrolls 6 percent less than the state average. Five of the eight local e-schools (light blue) had higher special education enrollment than the state average, with four being more than 8 percent above the state average. Around 45 percent of Cardington-Local Digital Academy's 57 students were identified with disability, or about 26 students. While the absolute number is not very high, the percentage is higher than the other e-schools and three times higher than the state's average. Regional schools' special education enrollment covers a wide range—from 6 percent to 31 percent at Auglaize County Educational Academy, which is double the state's average.

Chart 6 shows the percent of minority students enrolled at each e-school. One might expect statewide e-schools, which draw students

from across Ohio, to closely match the state demographics. And for the most part, this is the case. Four of the statewide e-schools are within 5 percent of the state average for minority enrollment, though none of the schools exceed the state average. Among the remaining three statewide schools, the Buckeye School for Online Success has the lowest minority percentage at 13 percent—12 percent below the state average.

Unlike the statewide schools, schools with geographic restrictions, regional or local, tend to reflect the populations of the districts they’re drawing from. For example, Akron Digital Academy enrolls 54 percent minority students. Because 88 percent of Akron Digital’s students come from Akron Public Schools and over 59 percent of Akron Public Schools’ enrollment is non-White, this makes sense. Lorain High School Digital’s enrollment also reflects its host district, the diverse Lorain City Schools, which enroll approximately 30 percent each of African-American, Hispanic, and White students.

Chart 5. Ohio E-Schools, Students With Disabilities Enrollment



While some argue that, because of the parent involvement and oversight required, many students of online learning come from families that can afford to have one parent at home, the demographics of Ohio suggest quite the opposite. Of the e-schools that reported “economically disadvantaged” data (Chart 7), all but three were above Ohio’s state average of 43 percent, suggesting that Ohio e-schools as a whole attract more economically disadvantaged students than the rest of the state. Statewide e-schools enrolled between 46 percent and 75 percent economically disadvantaged students, all higher than the state average. There’s also wide variation among regional and local schools, with schools enrolling anywhere from 21 percent to 87 percent economically disadvantaged students. Much like the minority enrollment, this likely reflects the demographics of the geographic area these schools draw from.

As this data shows, there’s no real “average” e-school student in Ohio. Student demographics vary widely, particularly for the regional and local e-schools that draw from limited geographic areas. Despite this variation, most of Ohio’s e-schools enroll higher

Chart 6. Ohio E-Schools, Minority Student Enrollment

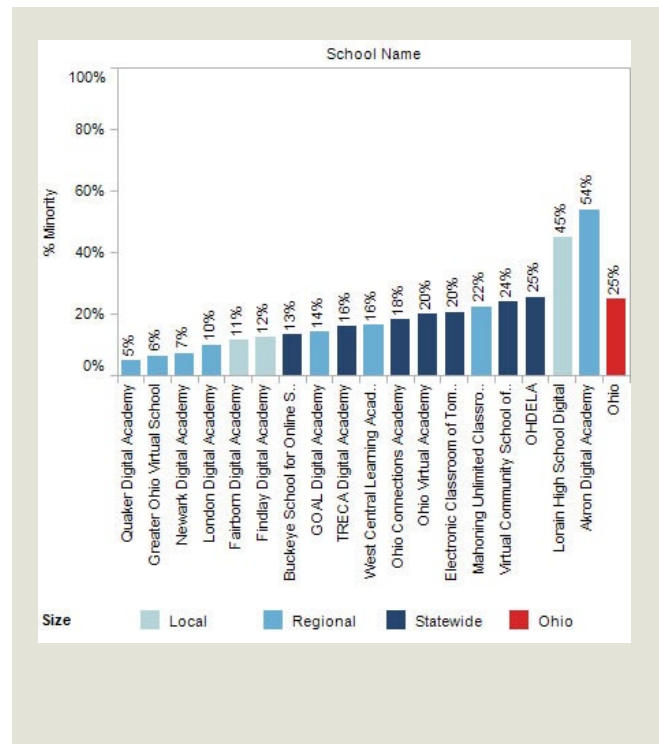
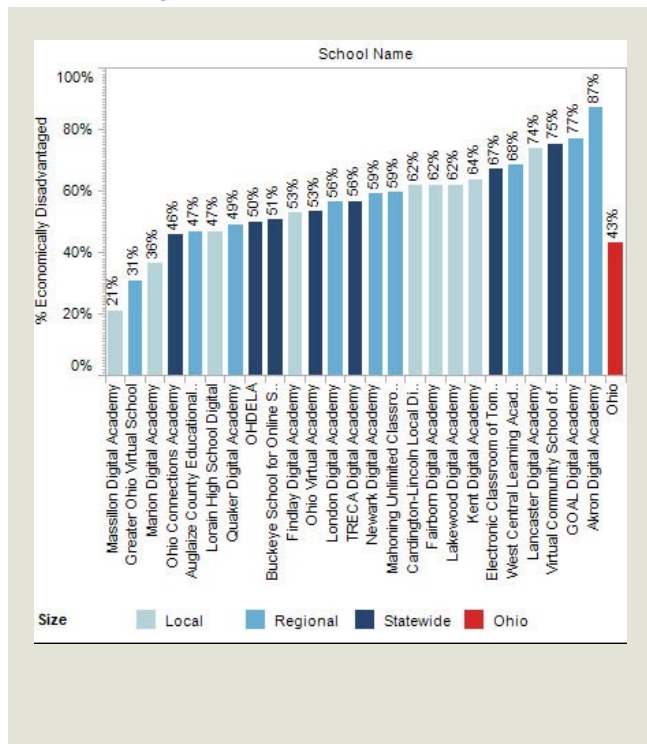


Chart 7. Ohio E-Schools, Economically Disadvantaged Student Enrollment



percentages of special education and economically disadvantaged students. Considering that these populations are often most at risk of dropping out, Ohio must ensure these schools are providing a quality education to its at-risk students. The continued lack of accountability for performance, particularly for drop-out recovery schools, may very well harm Ohio’s most at-risk students rather than help them.

But accountability assumes that students enroll long enough for a school to influence student outcomes. Tomorrow’s post takes a look at the average amount of time students are enrolled in e-schools and the implications for online learning in Ohio.

Part VII: Student Mobility in Ohio E-Schools

By Padmini Jambulapati and Erin Dillon • May 10, 2011

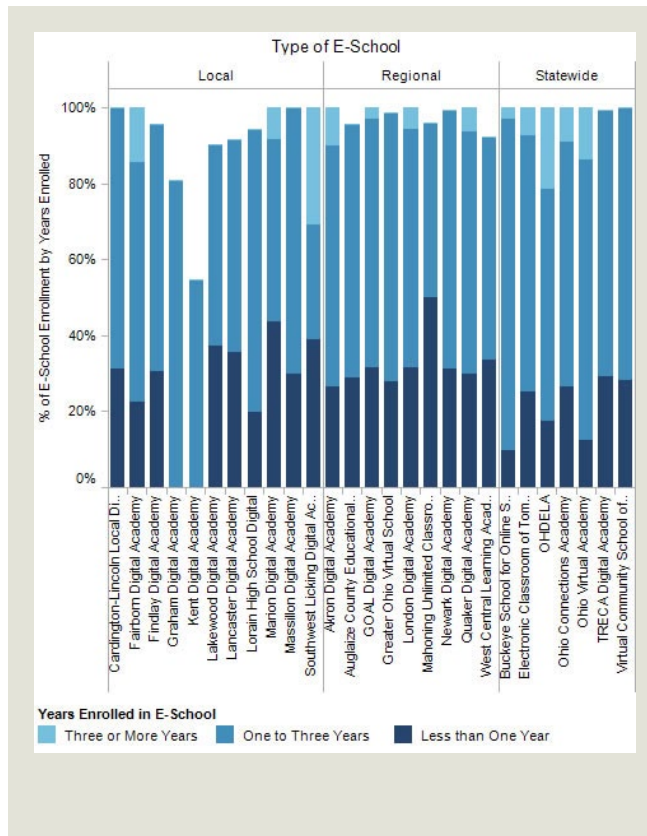
During this blog series on Ohio’s e-schools, we’ve been pretty clear that Ohio needs to do a better job of holding its existing e-schools accountable for student performance, especially for those schools serving students at risk of dropping out. Yesterday, we looked at the demographics of students enrolled in Ohio’s e-schools, and found that, while there is no “average” e-school student, e-schools do tend to serve a more economically disadvantaged student population than Ohio’s public schools and tend to serve a higher percentage of students with disabilities. Since these two groups of students are often most in need of a high-quality education, this raises the stakes even higher for ensuring that Ohio’s e-schools are doing the best possible job of educating their students.

But holding e-schools accountable is a difficult task: How do you know if students are truly “attending” e-schools and engaging with the curriculum? How do

you manage the logistics of getting students to take state tests—and does that even make sense given the rich data available through computer-based lessons? And how do you address the issue of student mobility? As a recent brief by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers points out, online schools are more likely to have students that enroll for only part of the year and aren’t enrolled when testing takes place, or to have students that leave after just one year, making it more difficult to assess online schools using growth models.¹

Today, we take a look at the mobility issue using data from the Ohio Department of Education on the percent of students in e-schools that are enrolled less than a year, between one and three years, and more than three years. Chart 8 shows the breakdown for each school by these “longevity” categories (some schools only had data reported for “one to

Chart 8. Years of Enrollment



three years”—the other categories are left blank) and divided by where the school gets its students (statewide, regional or local).

On average, nearly 30 percent of e-school students were enrolled less than one year, and just 11 percent were enrolled more than three years. The majority—about 64 percent—fell in the middle. There are some differences by the type of e-school, with statewide

e-schools having the highest percent of students on average enrolled in both the “more than three years” and “one to three years” categories.

So, is having 30 percent of e-school students enrolled less than one year too high? It’s hard to say at this point. This may simply reflect the novelty of online learning—it’s something families try, but then realize it’s not a good fit for them. Many students may also take classes to recover credits quickly or need an online environment because of illness or other circumstances, and don’t plan to stay past a year. And while all but five of Ohio’s e-schools serve grades K–12 (three are 9–12), the grade levels at which students enroll may affect how many years they stay. On the other hand, families committed to homeschooling are likely to stay multiple years at the same e-school.

While 30 percent may be higher than most brick-and-mortar traditional public schools, an important part of expanding school choice, through online and brick-and-mortar schools, is allowing students more mobility. As choice continues to expand, policymakers should anticipate higher mobility rates and will need to adjust accountability systems accordingly.

Next we’ll wrap up this series on Ohio’s e-schools by discussing the policy implications of Ohio’s decade of experience with online learning.

Note

1. John Watson and Chris Rapp, *Quality Authorizing for Online and Blended-Learning Charter Schools* (Chicago: National Association of Charter School Authorizers, April 2011).

Five National Policy Implications From Ohio’s E-Schools

By Bill Tucker • May 12, 2011

More than one million K-12, public-education students now take online courses. And, with new or pending legislation set to expand online offerings in states from Utah to Ohio to Florida, the numbers will continue to grow. State policymakers, some fearing high-profile stories of scandal and others feeling the pressure from intense lobbying efforts on all sides, are racing to catch up. In some states,

legislators are knocking down regulatory barriers, such as attendance and “seat-time” requirements, to speed expansion. Others, concerned about a radically different notion of schooling, have seized on a variety of tools for controlling growth, including caps on school enrollment or restrictions limiting enrollments to a single district or regional area.

But overly blunt—or carefree—approaches to regulation run the risk of making many of the same mistakes that policymakers made for almost two decades in their attempts to oversee charter schools. Our exploration of data from Ohio, one of the states with almost a decade of experience with online schooling, helps to illustrate that neither total de-regulation, nor restrictions based on broad assumptions about size, type of provider, or geography, are the right approach to ensuring high quality online learning experiences. In Ohio, data show that these factors are not determinative of the schools' actual performance. And, despite a moratorium on new online schools, the performance of Ohio's 27 "e-schools" is decidedly mixed.

1. Use Performance, Not Proxies, to Drive Regulation

What a school actually does—and how it performs its role to help children learn—rather than broad assumptions about the correct size, instructional program or governance model, should drive our efforts to ensure that these public schools are helping children succeed.

2. Tailor Authorizing and Oversight

Students will choose online schools for a multitude of reasons, and ideally, programs will respond with a wide variety of options. We can expect that, at least in the short-term, mobility into and out of these programs will be high (sometimes by design, other times because it was a poor fit). States, districts, and charter authorizers need to develop new policy frameworks to ensure reporting and accountability measures are appropriate.

3. Eliminate Accountability-Free Zones

While oversight should be appropriate, light must shine on districts' darkly lit corners. For decades, less was expected from students attending schools in poor communities. And, even prior to online options, alternative and "credit recovery" programs were rife with the potential to offer low-quality, watered-down expectations for learning.

It makes sense to offer students who aren't succeeding in traditional classrooms the opportunity to try a different approach (or even better, the chance to prevent failure). Yet, Ohio goes too far. There, state law allows e-schools that are designated as drop-out prevention and recovery schools *and* are sponsored by a local school district to avoid some of Ohio's accountability requirements, including mandatory closure for persistent low performance and accountability for the sponsoring district. We need to find the right balance.

4. Help Students and Families Make Good Choices

While online learning advocates feverishly push for states to allow students to choose among multiple online learning providers, there's been almost no attention to how students and families actually make choices. Data from Ohio show little relationship between a school's enrollment and its rating on the Ohio school performance index. And, despite statewide open enrollment options, many choose poor performing, locally based programs.

Across the country, there's a growing need for high-quality, independent, and highly accessible *Consumer Reports*-type analyses for online schools and programs. While each state provides school information, it is generally limited to test scores and almost impossible to aggregate across state lines. Given the emerging national market—with providers like K12 and Connections Academy present in dozens of states—it would be feasible to focus not just ratings, but in-depth analysis on just a dozen or so providers that serve tens of thousands of students, rather than the thousands of schools that sites like GreatSchools need to populate ratings for.

While government regulation must set basic standards for quality and accountability, we need other tools, such as market- and reputation-based accountability, to complement government regulation and provide incentives for schools to go further. These additional tools, like independent guides, can help ensure that local families or districts making decisions in one state understand a provider's track record across the country. Better information across districts and states will foster incentives to ensure high quality

everywhere—and ideally, punish providers that neglect their duties in any one place.

5. Ensure Transparency

I'll send a \$25 Starbucks gift card to the first commenter who can tell me how, from looking at the school's website, they figured out who actually runs OHDELA, the Ohio Distance and Electronic Learning Academy.¹

Throughout our exploration of Ohio E-schools, we found numerous examples where it was almost impossible to figure out who actually governed and managed a school. When trying to determine whether another school was managed by a for-profit company, the school told us they were a state-run school, the Department of Education didn't know and referred us to the school's authorizer, who then referred us to an outside consultant who could finally give an answer. Many districts also appear to take a hands-off approach and can provide little information about the e-schools they sponsor. These relationships are new and lack clarity on both accountability, and ultimately, who actually runs the school under the guise of these

districts. For example, prior to enrollment, many parents would have no idea who was providing the curriculum for their district's e-school unless they knew to visit TRECA's website.

In many public discussions about online learning, broad generalizations about radically different programs and teaching models are accepted at face value. As the data from Ohio illustrate, online students and programs are diverse—just as in traditional schools. The specific details, program models, curriculum, and of course, quality of teaching, matter. As online learning continues to grow and expand in ways that we may not even be able to envision, strong oversight to ensure both high quality learning experiences and accountability for public funds is essential.

Note

1. Commenter Bill Fitzgerald won the prize, noting that “At the risk of stating the obvious (which is, I believe the point you are making) White Hat is intentionally obscuring its involvement with this program, and this misdirection/intentional obscurity is completely legal.”

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