
Ohio Home Education Coalition

On-Line, Publicly-Funded School Being Marketed to Homeschoolers

May, 2000 (Corrected April, 2002)

Summary

An online, publicly-funded school, marketing their program to the homeschooling community across Ohio, will be in place by the fall of 2000. They plan to expand to 11,500 students within five years. The authors of this fact sheet have read the application for this community school and believe that they are making rash and unproven statements about homeschoolers. It is important for homeschoolers to understand the proposal and to understand that students will be enrollees of a publicly-funded school, no longer fulfilling the regulations required of homeschoolers. Therefore, they will no longer be homeschooling, but, merely utilizing a distance learning method of publicly-funded schooling.

Background

In Ohio, there are seven different classifications of elementary or secondary educational options.¹ A community school, commonly referred to as a "charter school," is one of those classifications. For purposes of clarity in this fact sheet, we will use the term community school.

Community schools are a newer option for education. The legislation allowing for such schools in Ohio was created in 1997. Each of these schools receives a state charter and start-up funding. They also receive a yearly

¹ **Chartered public school** (traditional, neighborhood public school, funded by state taxes. **Chartered nonpublic school** (private and most religious schools under standards described in OAC 3301-35-12 and receiving some state tax funding in ORC 3317); **Nonchartered, nontax-supported schools:** As described in OAC 3301-35-08 or "08 schools," organized based on "truly held religious beliefs;" not state-funded and have minimal requirements); **Voucher schools** (a pilot program, created originally in 1995 in Ohio in ORC 3313.97); **Community schools** (public schools as defined in Chapter 3314 of ORC; often referred to as "charter schools." These schools receive public funds and have requirements of other publicly funded schools, including testing, special education law, audits, recording keeping, immunizations, etc.); **Post-secondary option:** (provides for a high school student to have dual enrollment in college courses and is described in ORC 3365.02); **Home education** (education "primarily directed and provided by the parent or guardian of a child." The rules are covered under OAC 3301.34.)

allotment of state and federal education funds, just as the 612 traditional public schools.

Community schools claim to have fewer governmental restrictions imposed upon them. However, statutory requirements similar to traditional public schools include non-discrimination policies, teacher certification, proficiency tests, non-profit status, health and safety inspections and school audits.

The point here is not to argue the pros and cons of state-imposed conditions for any schools, including community schools. We state these requirements merely to point out that with a state charter and state funding, community school requirements, replicating many of those of traditional public and private schools, must be met. The history of legislative bureaucracy in education is exhaustive. Community schools' proponents will need to be vigilant to insure that, as these schools become more prolific, greater regulation is not imposed to control them in similar manner to traditional public schools.

eCOT

It is expected that by July 1, 2000, The Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (eCOT), an online, publicly-funded community school, will receive its charter via the Lucas County Education Services Center (LCESC), one of several sponsoring groups in Ohio.

On page 5 of their application², eCOT describes six categories of student populations as targets for enrollment, including "Homeschooled children; Hospital bound schooled children; Urban economically at-risk children; Health bound children; Institutionally schooled children; and Rural economically at-risk children." Nonetheless, the most prominent target market, as described in lengthy passages within the application, is homeschoolers. Homeschooled children are cited no less than eleven times in the application, while the other targeted populations receive mention two to three times.

² eCOT's application is available from the LCESC at Central Union Plaza, 415 Emerald Ave., 2nd Floor, Toledo, OH 43602.

Those lengthy passages clearly indicate to the authors of this fact sheet that the promoters of this school have little understanding of the history of homeschooling, the desires of most homeschoolers, the merits and accomplishments of the communities we have formed, or the role that most homeschooling parents feel they play in the education of their children. From the application:

“Our market research data suggests strongly that our targeted student populations, home schooled or those not currently attending school, are growing at a faster rate than ever before. For a variety of reasons, these students have found themselves **disenfranchised from traditional public education options. ...It seems that follow-up or performance profiling ceases to exist when parents make the decision to home school their children** or when students decide to drop out of school. Parents who exercise their right to home school their children, for whatever reason, **find themselves almost completely shut off from any state support.** The state in turn finds itself with little or no tracking or performance data with which to identify, understand, or assist in this increasing student segment.” (Page 5, emphasis added.)

“More research is needed and will be conducted by eCOT consultants. Further, **numerous one-on-one surveys** of home school parents³ has discovered that many of these **parents feel alienated from Ohio’s educational systems and are left to their own devices in educating their children. A feeling of being completely without support is common among these parent/student segments.**” (Page 8, emphasis added.) As of this writing, it appears that eCOT is beginning the random sales promotion to homeschoolers. Email addresses for those who have agreed to be contact people within the homeschooling community are being harvested from sites on the internet, and people are receiving unsolicited emails, such as: “Thought you might be interested in a new Ohio charter school **for Ohio home schoolers.** We feel parents should drive the education process. It is also a great resource for free curriculum and free use of a computer.” Their print

³ The authors of this fact sheet are spread across many regions of Ohio. Several of the authors are contact points for local homeschooling support groups and/or for people exploring homeschooling. No one has heard of any homeschool parents completing surveys for this type of school. No support group of which we are aware has seen the breakneck growth rates of homeschooling—increasing at a rate of over 110% per year for the past year” (page 8)—as claimed by eCOT.

material says that eCOT is: “an educational resource for those who would like the option of schooling their child at home.”

Differences: eCOT vs. homeschooling

The importance and beauty of homeschooling⁴ is that learning happens free from the many burdensome requirements of institutional schools. Freed from these mandates, we are able to educate our children according to our own principles and beliefs, using the resources of our families, of the homeschooling community and of the community at large.

Homeschooling works. We understand that with “state support” what we “gain in assistance,” we lose in freedoms.

Although some might find eCOT to be an intended educational choice, one must be quite certain to understand that **eCOT is not homeschooling.** The authors support each family’s right to make their own educational choice, and eCOT may well be such choice. One must be quite certain to understand, however, that from the practical to the philosophical aspects of eCOT enrollment, it is clear that the **child will be an enrolled student in a publicly-funded, online community school. For practical purposes, as an eCOT enrollee, you will no longer::**

- Send a notification to a school superintendent.
- Receive an excuse from compulsory attendance.
- Perform an assessment of your choosing for a subsequent homeschooling notification.
- Choose what you learn with your family.

As described above in the Background on community schools, eCOT must meet certain statutory requirements to maintain their charter, including administration of proficiency tests, non-discrimination policies, teacher certification, non-profit status for eCOT, and school audits.

In addition, they voluntarily have developed their program to model other public school functions and trends. From the application (*italics added*):

“eCOT students will be expected to master all required *learning outcomes* before progressing to the next educational level.” (page 1)
eCOT will follow the *goals* set forth by the Ohio Department of Education in the *Model Competency-Based Programs* for

⁴ The many and varied ways of homeschooling are as numerous as the families who homeschool. Space does not permit us to reiterate all those many reasons families have made this choice.

language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and arts. (pages 8-10)

Students are placed at “*appropriate grade level* through school records or individual placement tests.” (page 11) They will employ *IEP’s* (individualized education plans, written for special needs students, commonly prepared by school administrators and psychologists), to be *included in a student electronic profile (SEP)*. (page 11 and page page 24).

“All students will be *continually assessed* through the online SEP”. (page 12)

Students will receive observation, test administration and referral for assistance as needed from visits with a “*roaming teacher*” on at least a once-per-semester basis. (page 13)

“Data from the *Ohio Proficiency Tests* and appropriate off year testing will be used to *revise the curriculum.*” (page 13)

In hiring of teachers, preference will be given to teachers with “*advanced degrees.*” (page 16) eCOT’s implicit acceptance of *Goals 2000 objectives* with the citation of Educational Goal Number 4, footnoted, describing (for teachers) “continued improvements of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.” (page 16)

Regarding employee compensation, eCOT states that their *most important consideration* will have all employees “*eligible for incentive pay bonuses tied directly to targeted performance*” (page 17) and “*teachers will be compensated with a base salary augmented by significant performance incentives based on students’ academic achievement.*” (page 19)

Although there are vague references to a high degree of parental involvement scattered throughout the application, the only specific roles identified for parents include a “*satisfaction survey*” (page 14) and participation in the “*ePTP*”, seemingly analogous to the traditional school PTA (page 19). Although there are several provisions made for parental involvement through electronic means with persons outside the family (page 20), no recognition is given to the type of parental involvement typical to most homeschooling families, and there appear to be few opportunities for much beyond technological interaction.

The authors reiterate the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their own principles and beliefs. eCOT or any other publicly-funded school

is certainly included in those rights. Nonetheless, since a substantial share of their marketing promotions will inevitably target homeschoolers, it is essential to understand the purposes of this school and how they might differ from your family’s. There are some “*innovative*” notions advanced in the eCOT application that many within the homeschooling community, as well as families in general, may find problematic at best, including:

“eCOT students will acquire the skills needed to succeed in an increasingly technological world.” (page 1) This is their first statement in their list of objectives, followed in subsequent paragraphs by a discussion of mastering required learning outcomes and marketing-speak bulleted points for curriculum development. A heading titled “*Non-Academic Goals*” really speaks to technological data collections of students’ interests to develop the school-related subject area goals of the day. Finally, in a cursory one-line, they address one of the strongest realizations by homeschoolers of the importance of our chosen educational option: “eCOT will endeavor to strengthen family ties by utilizing and stressing family support/assistance in an individual child’s education.” (page 2)

“The lowered costs and increased capabilities of home computer equipment makes it possible for the computer to not only be a classroom aid but to actually be the classroom or a major part of the teaching/learning experience. The computer and the Internet can also be a conduit for maintaining socialization programs for students and families.” (page 2) After years of scrutiny and probing of homeschoolers with that offensive socialization question, how ironic (and annoying) that it seems to be totally acceptable to promote virtual socialization as a wonderful new standard.

Common corporate marketing practices these days include sales seminars by professional pitchmen, utilizing mainstream media, direct mail, kinetic A/V presentations, glossy brochures, and interactive websites. eCOT plans on a kindred promotional campaign to boost their enrollment (page 5), and mall information tables have already been employed. With few exceptions, the majority of the eCOT development team (more than 20 people) has professional backgrounds that include: business sales, corporate management, marketing research, media relations, political campaign consultant, state legislative aide, attorney, auditor/CPA, and text book editor

(Appendix I). (They have selected a school superintendent with educational background.)

“eCOT will bring together the various communications mediums of television, cable, telephone and computers as a powerful education system.” (page 19) We know of many families who are skeptical about media proliferation and question this facet of an educational trend, even as it currently exists.

- For quite some time, people with children enrolled in traditional classrooms have objected to impossible student/teacher ratios. The opportunity for one-on-one individual human contact is hampered, even in the best of traditional schools. Ratios of 15:1 are spoken of with great excitement. Conversely, in even the largest homeschooling families opportunities abound for individual human, loving and personal contact between a parent and a child. This has always been realized by the majority of homeschoolers as one of the most appreciated aspects, never exceeding the most publicized student/teacher ratios. eCOT will utilize even larger-than-typical ratios based on stated enrollment vs. teachers employed. In their first-year projections, 1900 students will be enrolled, with a certified teaching staff of 48, a ratio of 40:1. In their fifth year projections, when they anticipate enrolling 11,500 students with 227 teachers, the ratio increases to 51:1. (page 16) Remembering that most interaction with a teacher/mentor will be done on-line, with these kinds of ratios, opportunities seem negligible for teachers to know more about the child than that which exists on a computer terminal at the end of a phone line.
- Many believe that children should not be looked upon as a commodity to be harvested by the company with the most savvy pitch. Yet, when you read eCOT’s interest in promoting their services to traditional educational institutions, you find that “As the traditional institution realizes a benefit of the eCOT partnership, the institution can contribute more teaching time, enroll correspondingly more students, and help make a wider variety of courses available.” (page 21)
- Many parents have paid careful attention to the difficulties evidenced in recent trends toward “outcome based education”. eCOT’s approach to this initiative goes one step further, when it states: “eCOT shall provide individualized, **outcome based** educational opportunities both in academic and **social** areas.” (Emphasis added, By-Laws, Article II)

Use of tax dollars and profits

eCOT’s budget projections are astonishing. For each student, they project state-provided tax revenues of \$4,500 per student in the 2000-2001 school year. In five years time, eCOT will be receiving \$5,500 per student. Should they meet their expected enrollment expectations of 11,500 in their fifth year, they stand to collect \$63.25 million in student entitlements from the state.

Yet, their projected expenses after that five years are \$31.8 million with surplus revenues of \$31.4 million. Although the eCOT itself must be non-profit to maintain its charter, Kim Hardy, Director of Marketing and Admissions, states in a post on an e-mail list of homeschoolers: “The school will be managed by a for profit company called Altair Learning.com. This is where any surpluses come on the budget.” Each year, surplus revenues will be allocated for “dividend distribution”, to total \$6.3 million in the fifth year.

Where that money goes is uncertain.⁵

Beyond the first-year student entitlements, they will also receive \$150,000 from the state for a school development grant. They project receiving “vendor/provider trade credits and trade financing” of \$100,000 and corporate sponsorship of \$50,000 in the first year. Sadly, just as the traditional school model already abounds with “official” soft -drink and pizza sponsorships, so too, it seems, will eCOT.

⁵ One might suppose that with these kinds of monies being drawn off existing public school institutions, that community school charters would be the last thing the Lucas County Educational Service Center would help facilitate by sponsorship. Why would the LCESC, overseers to four separate county school districts, sponsor this charter? With each child enrolled at a community school, that is one less student available to traditional public schools in their charge; therefore, it is one less per-student public school allotment going to their own budget.

The answer to this could lie in the numbers for this community school and the other 15+ community schools that the LCESC has or will be sponsoring. eCOT will “out source” part of their management functions to the LCESC (page 18 and 27). According to the budget, over the course of the five-year period, LCESC will be paid a total of \$8.675 million. The authors find this an interesting possibility for resolution of on-going financing dilemmas for the LCESC. Just one of the school districts which LCESC oversees, Washington Local Schools, had a ballot levy defeated in March, 2000, which would have provided \$8.5 million in levy revenues. We can only anticipate that a vicious cycle will continue. Poor performance by the schools, whether real or perceived, will cause voter defeats of levy initiatives, causing school districts and other ESC’s to pursue “creative” financing methods. Will this force a proliferation of schools which can help shore-up sinking budgets, at the same time they return a “dividend distribution” to for-profit management companies?

What is the tangible benefit to a homeschooler who would enroll? The budget predicts the cost of a student computer for each enrolled student over the next five years to be \$600.

What we can do

We can give serious consideration to what homeschooling has meant to our families and to our community as it has been practiced before we were a target market for developers of community schools.

“We can understand, remember, and explain to others that for most homeschoolers, homeschooling has as much to do with freedom as education.” (Susan and Larry Kaseman, Home Education Magazine, January/February, 1999)

We can discuss our concerns with our families, with other homeschoolers, at support group meetings, at conferences, on websites, etc., so that many people become aware of the specific proposals made by eCOT and other marketers of programs for homeschoolers. Among other things, we could discuss the practical definition of an Ohio homeschooler vs. an enrolled student; targeted marketing of homeschoolers; the total lack of homeschooling understanding on the part of eCOT and possibly other marketers; the losses to strong family-decided opportunities and experiences that far exceed a \$600 computer and a state-approved diploma. We can discuss broader concerns with neighbors, friends, and the community at large, especially the use of educational tax monies for eventual profit of management corporations. Also, many people are focusing on the undermining of the traditional public school system as we transform into public schools for profit.

We could obtain and study a copy of the eCOT application (see address in Footnote 2) or any other community school application, especially ones that target homeschoolers. The authors are sad to report that we have heard of another community school “for homeschoolers” possibility developing in Putnam County. And, Cincinnati Public Schools “are investigating the feasibility of offering educational services to home schooled students. The program would provide educational consulting services to parents...”

We could write thoughtful letters to our elected officials in the Ohio Senate and House describing the concerns we as taxpayers have regarding the significant corporate profits that will be realized at taxpayer expense for community school ventures of this type.

This information was prepared by Ohio Home Education Coalition an open and inclusive coalition of interested homeschoolers who come together to raise awareness of issues facing homeschoolers in Ohio. This and other fact sheets may be found at the OHEC website: <http://grafixbynix.com/ohec/>

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