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Chicago Schools Opens Its First Virtual Elementary School

By Patricia Hawke

The Illinois State Board of Education has approved the state's first virtual public elementary school, the Chicago Virtual Charter School. The Board acted against State Superintendent Randy Dunn's recommendation to disapprove the Chicago schools application, as well as against the opposition of the powerful Chicago Teachers Union, by voting a five-to-four approval.

Though virtual schools already exist in the United States, they usually are high schools. Several states, however, prohibit virtual charter schools, such as Indiana, Tennessee and New York. South Carolina goes one step further by prohibiting any home-based instruction at its charter schools.

Opposition to the Chicago schools' new virtual elementary school stem from a variety of areas. Here are just a few:

- Computers will replace teachers and/or reduce their role in education, eliminating many teacher positions.
- The one-on-one attention that students may receive in a physical classroom setting will be lost.
- Virtual students in the Chicago schools will not receive enough social interaction, stunting their socialization skills.

Proponents believe the Chicago schools new virtual institution may give some children a chance to succeed, where traditional schools already have failed. The state board's Chairman Jesse Ruiz noted that he received many compelling letters from parents, pleading for an alternative approach for their Chicago schools children.

Another issue that faced the state board is the current Illinois law on charter schools, which states they must be "non-home based". It was for this reason that State Superintendent Dunn had recommended the new Chicago schools' application be denied. This added more fuel to the Teachers Union's argument against approving the school.

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State board members and proponents argued that the charter school laws were enacted in the 1990s, before lawmakers could have anticipated the growth of technology that makes a virtual school possible. Chicago schools General Counsel Patrick Rocks told the board that the restrictions on home-based charter schools were from concerns that home schools would attempt to reposition themselves as charter schools in order to secure public funding.

Charter schools are part of the Chicago schools system and are given more flexibility in staffing, curriculum and other areas — similar in theory to home schools. They receive public funding per student, causing the lawmakers concern over a possible redefinition of home schools. Rocks presented board members with letters from several of the lawmakers who enacted the law that stated their intent was not to block Internet-based schooling.

After the vote, Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart vowed to take "swift and appropriate" action to stop or block the opening of the school. Rocks noted that it was very unlikely that the Union could mount any viable legal challenge.

The Chicago schools' new virtual institution opens September 13, 2006. Already about 300 families have applied for their children to attend, and the school can accept another 300 students, according to Sharon Hayes, head of the school.

Once enrolled, the Chicago schools families receive desktop computers, workbooks and other student materials. The Chicago schools students are required to meet weekly at a downtown Chicago learning center, located within DePaul University. The students interact regularly with teachers through emails, conferences and workshops, as well as interacting with teachers and other students at the learning center.

Chicago Virtual Charter School already scheduled to serve a wide variety of elementary Chicago schools children. They include gifted and special education students, as well as children who previously attended public, private and home schools. Their web site is at:

<http://www.chicagovcs.org>

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Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. For more information on Chicago schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Illinois/Chicago/index.html>

A Record 377 California Schools Honored With The Distinguished School Award

By Patricia Hawke

Chicago Schools Opens Its First Virtual Elementary School

The California Schools created the California Schools Recognition Program in 1985. Its purpose is to publicize and reinforce California schools priorities, which are to improve student scholastic achievement and promote students based upon measurable objectives. The program identifies and honors public schools that exhibit exemplary and inspiring achievement. Though participation in the program is voluntary, the California Distinguished School Award is highly coveted.

To be considered for the award, California schools must meet a variety of eligibility requirements. These include designated federal and state accountability measures that are based upon the No Child Left Behind, Adequate Yearly Progress, and Academic Performance Index measurement programs. Approximately, five percent of California schools are selected each year for the award, with no fewer than 40 counties typically being represented.

The program alternates awards yearly between the elementary and secondary California schools. Year 2006 honors elementary schools.

California schools that meet the requirements complete an application and submit it to a team of local educators from across the state, which evaluate and score the merits of each school application. Schools with the highest scoring applications are selected as statewide nominees for the award. Nominated California schools then receive an onsite visit by a team of county school superintendents and members of the California Department of Education, who validate the accuracy of the application data.

Those California schools selected for the Distinguished School Award are honored at a statewide ceremony, where the state school superintendent awards a plaque and flag to each school. The program and annual ceremonies are funded through the generosity of prominent California corporations and statewide education organizations that believe educational excellence should be rewarded and encouraged publicly.

In 2006, a record 377 public elementary schools were honored with the California Distinguished School Award, surpassing the 302 elementary schools honored in 2004 — the last elementary school award cycle. They represent the largest number of elementary school awardees in the 21-year history of the program.

The 2006 California schools awardees were chosen from 190 school districts in 40 counties. They were selected from the largest number of eligible elementary schools to date, setting another record for the program. Of the more than 5,000 elementary schools in California, 2,043 were eligible to apply for the 2006 award. California schools are proving that student scholastic excellence can be nurtured and consistently improved.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on California schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/California/index.html>



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