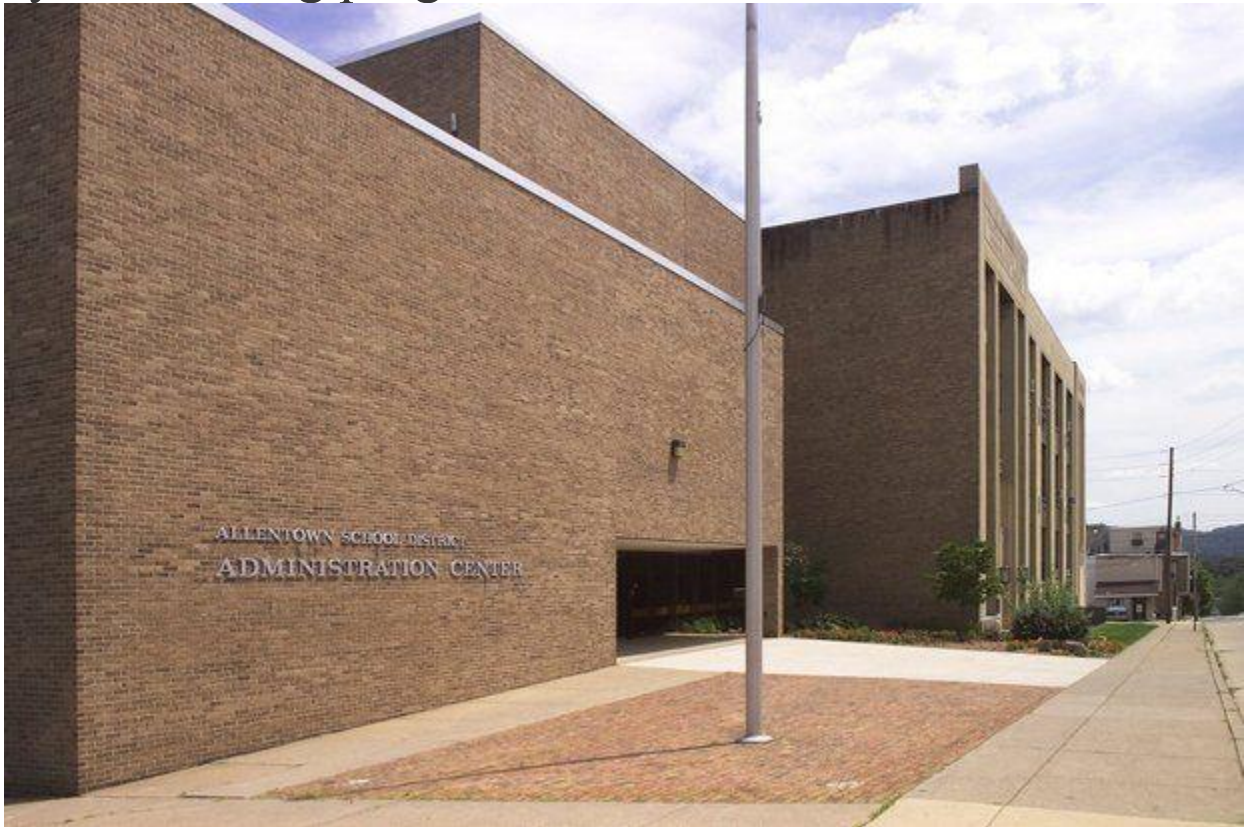


Allentown School District seeks vast expansion of cyber learning programs



The Allentown School District Administration Center. (*Allentown School District | Courtesy Photo*)

Nearly 2,000 students left the Allentown School District in favor of charter and cyber schools last year, bringing millions of the district's tuition dollars with them.

The district hopes to stop that exodus and win those students back by expanding its meager online course offerings into a full-blown cyber division with full- and part-time online classes for its students.

"We're trying to make sure we keep up with trends and what's going on, and frankly we are not ahead of the game in this area," Superintendent Russell Mayo said during a presentation to the school board Thursday night. "We want to bring a specific focus to it."

Starting in September, the district wants to expand the Allentown Virtual Academy, its in-house online schooling program, and grow its variety of course offerings over the subsequent 12 months.

During that time, officials hope to lure back 60 students who had previously left the district for cyber schools, said Luke Shafinsky, a William Allen High School assistant principal helping implement the program.

The students would be taught by Allentown School District teachers, who could customize and change the classes based on the needs of the individual students, Mayo said.

An expensive trend

Last year, a total of 1,942 students left the district for charter schools, with 351 choosing cyber schools, Shafinsky said. That is a growing trend over the past several years.

But the district is financially responsible for their tuition, which is \$8,148.37 per regular education student and \$18,436.83 per special-education student.

Assuming all 351 cyber school students were regular education, that means the district lost \$2.86 million in tuition dollars, a 45 percent increase from \$1.98 million two years ago, Shafinsky said.

If the district lures back 60 students as they plan, they would recapture \$488,880 in lost tuition costs, which Shafinsky said is more than enough to cover the roughly \$372,500 in expected expenses for the program.

In addition to targeting students who have left or are considering leaving the district, Mayo said the program will target students who need additional Advanced Placement options, and those who need to make up credits in a short amount of time.

When eventually expanded, Shafinsky said, the program will offer such courses as Advanced Placement, English language learner supports, college preparation and summer school remediation.

The projected costs include \$100,000 in salary and benefits for an administrator to oversee the program, as well as \$50,000 in professional services, \$50,000 in professional development and \$40,000 in software licenses.

Some concerns voiced

Several school board members felt the program will prove more costly than currently projected and asked for a more specific breakdown of costs, particularly for teacher salaries.

Board member Julie Ambrose expressed concern because until the new program is fully implemented, the first set of students would continue to receive virtual instruction through the district's existing online learning programs offered by Virtual Learning Network Partners.

Students would not receive instruction through the new program until December. But Ambrose said the district has determined the existing Virtual Learning Network instruction is ineffective.

"I love the idea of where we're eventually going to get with this. ... (But) I think it's immoral to launch into this by starting out students in a program we know to be inefficient," she said. "It's a rushed model."

The proposed cyber division would be expanded in phases, with new courses offered and programs added in each phase.

The first phase, spanning from September to December, would target 20 students who have already left the district. Another 20 would be targeted in the second phase starting in January and then another starting in the final phase June, Shafinsky said.

The district would enlist Bridges Virtual Education Services and Apex Learning Digital Curriculum to develop the virtual learning programs. Bridges is a partnership between the Bucks County Intermediate Unit and the Quakertown Community School District.

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