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# Former Students' and Their Learning Coaches' Perceptions of Their Cyber-Charter School Experiences: A Case Study

James J. Shoemake

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FORMER STUDENTS' AND THEIR LEARNING COACHES' PERCEPTIONS OF  
THEIR CYBER-CHARTER SCHOOL EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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This qualitative case study examined the perceptions of former students who are economically disadvantaged from a poor, rural district in central Pennsylvania who left their traditional school to enroll in one of the three biggest cyber-charter schools in the state. Through extensive interviews with the students and their learning coaches, the study attempted to see the experience through the eyes of those who lived it. Particular emphasis was placed on supports students and their learning coaches received from their schools and teachers and in their homes. Also, the researcher attempted to understand the perceptions of students and their learning coaches about the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in a for-profit cyber-charter school as opposed to remaining in their traditional schools.

The results of this study, based on the experiences of five students and their learning coaches, imply that support from home is critical for student success in cyber-charter schools. Support from family members or loved ones was found to be more effective than support from social agents or acquaintances, and support from home was found to be more important than support from school. The study also implies that not all students are suited to work in the online environment. Some students in the study reported a sense of isolation as they worked in their cyber-charter schools. Some students in the study also had difficulty adapting to this new way of learning. Finally, the study

determined that students who are not capable of functioning in a public school environment may feel more comfortable and be better served in a cyber-charter program. The study provides recommendations for improving the cyber-charter school experience. The improvements suggested included opening local satellite offices around the state staffed by a teacher to provide more face-to-face interaction with students, offering social opportunities in more local venues so students can connect in a sustainable way, and finally, developing a more rigorous screening process that would give all potential students and their learning coaches a realistic view of the expectations required in the cyber environment.

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“Do not hurry; do not rest” – Goethe

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

The Charter School Law that was passed in 1997, known as Act 22, governs cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania. The Commonwealth's charter school system is intended to improve pupil learning, increase learning opportunities for all pupils, encourage the use of differing and innovating teaching methods, provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system, and hold the schools established under this act accountable for meeting measurable academic standards (Pennsylvania Public School Code Amendment, 1997, p. 18-19). The Pennsylvania Department of Education further explained that

at the heart of the Charter School Law is the idea that cyber-charter schools will serve as laboratories of innovation on behalf of all of Pennsylvania's schools. Therefore, a cyber-charter school applicant must demonstrate that the proposed cyber-charter school will provide innovative and unique educational opportunities for students beyond what they can receive in their local school. A cyber-charter school, as part of its overarching mission, is expected to offer students an alternative means of achieving academic proficiency. A successful cyber-charter school must be grounded in accountability for academic success. The educational programs offered by the charter school should emphasize the development and broad dissemination of best practices in the context of ensuring the flexibility and innovative atmosphere that are inherent in cyber-charter schools. (Basic Education Circular, 2006, p. 3)

Currently there are 14 cyber-charter schools operating in Pennsylvania. Their combined enrollment for the 2015-2016 school year was 34,603 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). Cyber-charter school tuitions, which are paid by local school districts, have continued to rise. As shown in Table 1, Feinberg (2016) estimated the cost of cyber-charter schools to public school districts in Pennsylvania for the past three years:

Table 1

*Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter Combined Tuition*

School Year	Total Tuition Payments
2013-2014	\$393.5 Million
2014-2015	\$398.8 Million
2015-2016	\$436.1 Million

Cyber-charter schools have become the most popular option to replace traditional education. Online schools enroll students who may not be able to physically attend a brick-and-mortar school due to a disability or being involved in Olympic-level sports. Cyber-charters can also enroll students from remote locations and deliver a wider variety of courses than traditional schools can provide (Marsh, Carr-Chellman, & Sockman, 2009). Clark and Berge (2005) cited increased access and choice as two of the benefits of K-12 online learning. These benefits provided by cyber-charter schools give these relatively new types of schools the ability to reach students who have difficulty remaining enrolled in traditional schools. Cyber-charter schools are not bound geographically and, therefore, are able to offer services to students who live in the inner

city, as well as students who live in extremely rural areas. According to Neiderberger (2012), cyber-charter schools offer the following advantages:

1. offer opportunities to students who don't succeed in the traditional classroom
2. help equalize education by offering a standard curriculum and resources
3. allow students can work at their own pace. Students who struggle can take more time and students who grasp the material quickly can move ahead.
4. allow students to write comments online, which may be easier for them than speaking out loud in a classroom. (p. 2)

Having the ability to choose their school provides opportunities for students to find the school and program of study that best suits their needs (Wiley, 2009).

The tremendous growth of cyber-charter schools over the past several years, however, has not been without controversy. There are some educators who believe that cyber-charter schools meet the goals set forth by Act 22. They believe that cyber-charters are an innovative way to enhance school choice and that these schools are as effective as traditional brick-and-mortar schools, and in some cases, better (Brady, Umpstead, & Eckes, 2010; Wiley, 2009). Others claim that cyber-charters drain resources from already cash-strapped districts. Their argument is that cyber-charters are not as effective in teaching their students and that profit motive is a major determinant of policy (DeJarnatt, 2013; Saul, 2011). As a result, cyber-charter schools may soon become the most “disruptive innovation” in the education system (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008, p. 4).

There are numerous studies that argue that cyber-charter school students achieve at higher levels on standardized tests, while other studies claim cyber-charter students do

worse. Considering the explosive growth of these institutions over a short period of time, research about how cyber-charter schools compare with traditional public schools is bound to become more important because of federal policies that have encouraged the growth of more charter schools (Foster, 2011). As an educational administrator, the researcher has noted the growth of cyber-charter schools and watched as some students left his district to enroll in a school of their choice. These students live in a poor rural district that has struggled with the most recent budget “squeeze,” and the growing cyber-charter bill has become a burden on the district’s limited resources. In an effort to recapture some of the money leaving the district for cyber-charter schools, the district has instituted its own cyber school program to try to keep students who still value the school’s diploma. Similarly, many other school districts in Pennsylvania are developing their own in-house cyber-charter schools in an effort to meet the needs of their own students while discouraging them from enrolling in cyber-charter schools that will charge the district tuition. (Davis, 2014; Niederberger, 2012). In 2014, the Philadelphia School District opened its own cyber-charter school, The Philadelphia Virtual Academy, in an effort to respond to demand for cyber options. The district estimates this option has saved 45% of cyber-charter tuitions paid to other cyber-charter schools (McCorry, 2014). The course completion rate of the students from the researcher’s district who have entered cyber-charter schools is roughly 45% (Sapphire Student Information System, 2017). Students leave the district to enter cyber-charter schools for many reasons, but in the experience of the researcher, the majority leave because parents feel their child has been bullied or they have had some disagreement with the school district administration that they feel has not been resolved to their satisfaction. In an open letter to the public, the

CEOs of three cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania wrote that “it is clear that parents do not choose to enroll their student at a public cyber-charter school because something is right at their traditional public school, but rather because there is something wrong” (Flurie, Barnett, & Rossetti, 2015, p.1). However, with their desire to sever ties with school personnel, parents do not always take into consideration that they are now responsible for being the prime motivator of their student. They learn that cyber-charter school requires a student to be self-motivated and requires time management and technology skills (Hendricsen, 2014). The results, more often than not in the researcher’s district, are that the student returns the following year and must repeat the grade because of lack of progress in the cyber-charter school. If the student is over 17 years old, he or she may not return at all and over half drop out of school (Sapphire Student Information System, 2017). In these types of instances, students could be exposed to the most effective curriculum possible; however, if there is little home support or little value is placed on education in the home, that exposure can end up being a wasted educational opportunity. Students who are economically disadvantaged are particularly vulnerable (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013). Some students who enter cyber-charters are not equipped for the required self-regulation, and many of their families are not able to provide the support they will need to succeed academically (Davis, 2011). However, these characteristics do not apply to all cyber-charter students who are economically disadvantaged, and some do well. The concern lies with the students who are already falling behind when they enter a cyber-charter school. These students will need support from the school and home to succeed.

Students who are economically disadvantaged in Pennsylvania are defined as those students receiving free or reduced lunch (Kids Count Data Center, 2015). In order to qualify for this program, a family's income may not exceed 130% of the federal poverty level of \$23,800 for a family of four (Kids Count Data Center, 2015). During the 2015-2016 school year, 51 percent of cyber-charter students in Pennsylvania were classified as economically disadvantaged (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). This figure is higher than the state public school average of 45% for the same period (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). When compared to statewide figures, cyber-charter schools enroll a higher percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged and a lower percentage of English language learners than public schools (Jack, Sludden, & Schott, 2013). Cyber-charter schools are organized so that students determine when and for how long they will be connected to the curriculum provider. Two recent studies (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013; Hendricsen, 2014) noted that to be successful in the unstructured cyber learning environment, a student must be motivated, have a strong sense of time management, and enjoy strong familial support to meet the demands of autonomy that come with the program. These are advantages that many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may not receive (Cooper-Parham, 2015). With the increase of single-parent homes, many students who enroll in a cyber-charter school are left to themselves to learn (Borup, 2016). In some cases, parents can be of no help because they are uneducated themselves (Davis, 2011). Several of these cyber-charter schools now advertise specifically to students who are considered at-risk in traditional schools (Cooper-Parham, 2015; Figueiredo-Brown, 2013).

Agora Cyber Charter School, a for-profit organization, is the second largest cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania. Current and former staff members reported that intense recruitment efforts do nothing to determine the suitability of the program for the students enrolling (Saul, 2011). Many students who enroll in Agora do not have support from parents and are not self-motivated, and this deficit causes problems and high rates of withdrawal (Saul, 2011). The withdrawal rate has not changed the practice of admissions at Agora Cyber Charter School: They are still aggressively marketing their program. Currently, Agora is under the scrutiny of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. According to Woodall (2016), David Volkman, Executive Deputy Secretary, notified Agora by letter in May of 2016 of Department of Education concerns about what he termed “very serious data quality issues” (p.#1) that centered around student testing, attendance, and accurate billing. Agora was given until May 31<sup>st</sup> of 2016 to provide accurate data or the Department of Education would take appropriate action against the school.

There is a need to explore the experiences of former cyber-charter students who are economically disadvantaged, as well as their learning coaches who are defined as parents or primary caregivers who supervised the students’ learning experience in the home. This study examined the perceptions of former students and their learning coaches regarding whether they felt the students received meaningful instruction and if the students were provided with adequate support from their cyber-charter school. The study also endeavored to discover the perceptions held by former students and their learning coaches about the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in a cyber-charter school. In sum, the study examined students’ and their learning coaches’ perceptions on whether

enrolling in a cyber-charter school either aided or impeded students' ability to succeed in school.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The three largest cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania are enrolling students who are economically disadvantaged, some of whom are unmotivated and have little support at home. The result is that some of these students struggle in cyber-charter school and eventually either return to their home school or drop out of school.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The three largest cyber-charter schools in the state operate as for-profit ventures. Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, Agora Cyber-Charter School, and Commonwealth Connections Academy, together currently enroll 77% of all cyber-charter students in Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). All three of these cyber-charter schools employ vigorous print, radio, and television advertising campaigns that feature the words *free tuition* prominently. All three cyber-charter schools promise to provide a computer, monitor, and an Internet connection at no cost to the consumer. Looking at the incredibly expensive advertising campaigns promoting these cyber-charter schools, public school advocates are questioning whether the advertising for these schools is meeting a need or creating one (DeJarnatt, 2013). As state aid declines and districts are forced to trim their staffs through furloughs and attrition, there is mounting concern among school boards about the outlay of district funds used to pay cyber-charter school tuitions. Many districts have developed their own cyber-school option in a bid to compete with the cyber-charters and to keep some of that money in-house (Davis, 2014;

Niederberger, 2012). Still, with those measures in place, cyber-charter enrollment continues to rise.

This study examined the perceptions of five former students who are economically disadvantaged from a school district located in southern Pennsylvania who left their traditional school to enroll in one of the three largest for-profit cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania. Interviews were conducted with the former students and their learning coaches to identify the students' experiences. The intent of the study was to determine how well students who are economically disadvantaged and left their home schools progressed in the cyber-charter environment. Another focus was to determine the level of support cyber-charter students received from their school and from their homes and how that assistance impacted their ability to succeed in school. Finally, the study attempted to examine the perceptions of cyber-charter students and their learning coaches about the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in a cyber-charter school.

As more taxpayer money goes into funding cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania, legislators should be determining if students who are economically disadvantaged and enrolled in cyber-charter schools and their learning coaches received the support needed to progress in that online environment. Legislators should also look at the perceptions of these consumers to determine if they feel they are being well served by their individual cyber-charter school.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of former students who chose to leave their brick-and-mortar school to attend a for-profit cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania in terms of their

achievement and the support they received from their cyber-charter schools and in their homes?

2. What are the perceptions of learning coaches who were responsible for supervising students who enrolled in a for-profit cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania in terms of their students' learning and the support they received from the cyber-charter school?

3. What are the perceptions of students who left their brick-and-mortar schools to enroll in for-profit cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania and their learning coaches in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of leaving traditional education for an online experience?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The study of ethics as part of educational leadership training is a relatively new development (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Scholars have looked at the field of ethics and applied it to develop codes of ethical conduct in numerous other fields over the years. Law and medicine are probably the most recognizable examples. Most people have heard of the Hippocratic Oath doctors must take or the pledge that lawyers must make to provide adequate representation for their clients before they can practice. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) advocated for this type of ethical code for school decision-makers. The authors have examined ethics in education, specifically as they pertain to leadership and decision-making, and have combined existing ethical theoretical approaches to develop what they termed the Multiple Paradigm Approach (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The Multiple Paradigm Approach combines the ethics of justice, critique, and care with the ethics of a new paradigm, the profession. The focus of the ethics of the

profession is determined by what is best for the child. Applying the Multiple Paradigm Approach to moral and ethical issues allows decision-makers to look at the issue facing them from multiple viewpoints. Educators need to use deep self-reflection to help them determine their own personal ethical codes. Only by looking at each of these paradigms in turn and examining their own biases can decision-makers arrive at a truly ethical decision: “If there is a moral imperative for the profession, it is to serve the best interests of the student. Consequently, this idea must lie at the center of any professional paradigm for educational leaders” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 25).

The ethic of justice is characterized by faith in the law and hope for progress. This ethic involves a commitment to human freedom (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Strike, Haller, and Soltis (1998) liken the ethic of justice to the golden rule of equal respect:

First, the principle of equal respect requires us to treat people as ends rather than means. This means that we may not treat them as though they were simply means to further our own goals. We must respect their goals as well. We cannot treat people as though they were things, mere objects, who are valued only insofar as they contribute to our welfare. (p. 39)

The ethic of critique is based on critical theory, which, in turn, is based on the analysis of social class and its inequities (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016 p.14). This ethic focuses on not blindly accepting the ethics of those in power but instead looking through the eyes of the downtrodden before making decisions. The ethic of critique challenges the status quo and is aimed at awakening educators to inequities in society, as well as in schools (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The first job of the schools is to care for our children (Noddings, 1992). Feminists such as Nell Noddings have defined the ethic of care, which emphasizes social responsibility and avoiding injustices (Noddings, 1992). The focus of this ethical framework is that students are the center of the educational process. These students need nurturing and encouragement to reach their full potential. The ethic of care requires educators to listen to these “other voices” before they make a decision that will have a direct impact upon them (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The ethics of the profession are the guidelines that frame the ethical code of responsibilities of school personnel. A sample code of ethics from the School Superintendents Association, an organization founded in 1865 with 13,000 current members, is outlined below:

The educational leader:

1. Makes the education and the well-being of students the fundamental value of all decision making. Fulfills all professional duties with honesty and integrity and always acts in a trustworthy and responsible manner.
2. Supports the principle of due process and protects the civil and human rights of all individuals.
3. Implements local, state, and national laws.
4. Advises the school board and implements the board’s policies and administrative rules and regulations.
5. Pursues appropriate measures to correct those laws, policies, and regulations that are not consistent with sound educational goals or that are not in the best interest of children.

6. Avoids using his/her position for personal gain through political, social, religious, and economic or other influences.
7. Accepts academic degrees or professional certification only from accredited institutions.
8. Maintains the standards and seeks to improve the effectiveness of the profession through research and continuing professional development.
9. Honors all contracts until fulfillment, release or dissolution mutually agreed upon by all parties.
10. Accepts responsibility and accountability for one's own actions and behaviors.
11. Commits to serving others above self (AASA Statement of Ethics, 2007, p. 1).

Starratt (2003) made the argument, which was echoed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), that all three ethics (justice, critique, and care) are not incompatible but, in fact, complement each other and allow for a richer response to the complex educational challenges facing educators today. They advocated for an ethic that is cognizant of all the other paradigms combined in an ethics of the profession, which has the best interests of the child as its basic tenet. This study utilized the Multiple Paradigm Approach to analyze the experiences of former students who are economically disadvantaged and their learning coaches while they attended cyber-charter schools. The study particularly focused on the perceptions of students and learning coaches about their cyber-charter schools to determine if they felt their schools' practices and policies served their best interests.

## **Significance of Study**

Cyber-charter school enrollment across the country has increased 230% in the last five years (Baker & Miron, 2015; DeJarnatt, 2013; and Hendricsen, 2014). This increase is being felt financially in every district that sends students to cyber-charter schools (DeJarnatt, 2013). However, the rapid rise in cyber-charter enrollment has drastically outpaced the research on the efficacy of virtual learning (Barkovich, 2014). This study adds to that body of knowledge and helps inform debate about this subject.

Until 2010, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania required school districts to pay 80% of their per-pupil cost to any cyber-charter in which a district student enrolled, regardless of the actual expenses the cyber-charter school incurred (Associated Press, 2006). The state then reimbursed local school districts 20% of these cyber-charter costs. When Governor Tom Corbett was elected in November of 2010, his administration cancelled that reimbursement funding and required districts to pay the full 80% of their per-pupil cost. Because most cyber-charter schools do not have a physical plant, provide no transportation, offer very few extra-curricular activities, and do not have a teachers' union with which to contend, their costs are different from traditional brick-and-mortar schools. Cyber-charter schools do not operate within physical boundaries; they draw students from many different districts. These districts may have vastly different spending levels, so the amount of revenue derived from a student in one district could be very different from a student in another district (DeJarnatt, 2013). Public school advocates argue that per-pupil payments made to cyber-charter schools do not reflect the cost to run those schools. The result is that the cost of cyber tuition is different from one district to the next (Pennsylvania School Boards Association, 2016). Local school districts are

outraged that they must fund out-of-district schools that they have not approved, cannot monitor, and are not empowered to regulate (Huerta, d'Entremont, & Gonzalez, 2006 p.26). Public school advocates claim the funding system is unfair because students who attend cyber-charter schools from different districts pay different tuitions, yet receive the same education. With the election of Governor Tom Wolf who advocated for charter school reform, changes are expected in cyber-school funding. In his initial budget proposal, Governor Wolf included policies that would cut funding to cyber-charter schools and refund money to school districts if the cyber-charter school spent less than the revenue it received (Grossman, 2015). In general, Wolf's initiatives may face opposition because of the number of cyber-charter school advocates currently in both houses of the state legislature.

Public concern is also being expressed about the amount of education funding in the form of tax dollars that are being used to pay the advertising expenses of the three largest cyber-charter schools in the state (Saul, 2013). The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA, 2016) used Right-To Know laws to make requests of all cyber-charter schools in the state seeking to determine their advertising and marketing expenditures. As seen in Table 2, A. Christ (personal communication, February 14, 2017) who wrote the PSBA study, listed the advertising and marketing expenditures of the three largest cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania for the 2014-2015 school year:

Table 2

Advertising Expenses 2014-2015

School	Advertising Expense	Cost per Pupil
Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School	\$1,307,272	\$139.90
Agora Cyber Charter School	\$139,225	\$14.99
Commonwealth Connections Academy	\$2,025,475	\$231.01

Public school advocates argue that any dollar spent on advertising is money that is not spent on educating children (Saul, 2013). During the 2014-2015 school year, these three schools spent \$3.5 million dollars of taxpayer money on advertising. Critics also note that some of the advertising firms that provide service to the cyber-charter schools may not be based in Pennsylvania, so some money being spent on advertising is not even retained in the state (Hassler-Waters, Barbour, & Menchaca, 2014).

Opponents of cyber-charter schools point to the academic achievement levels of these schools to argue that students do not learn as much, or as well, in virtual environments as they do in regular classrooms. Only two of the 14 cyber-charter schools operating in Pennsylvania made *Adequate Yearly Progress* in 2011: Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cyber School; none of them achieved *Adequate Yearly Progress* in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, or 2016 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). Under the guidelines of the *School Performance Profile* adopted by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to measure the growth of students within a school, a score of 70 points or better is considered proficient. This score is derived from scores on the state assessments, the PSSA and the Keystone Exams, as well as other metrics such as

dropout rate and scores of students who take the PSAT or the SAT. Last year, the scores of the three largest cyber-charter schools in the state ranged from 37.7 to 52.5 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). Proponents of school choice, including cyber-charter schools, maintain that these schools will provide the transformation of education by taking instruction away from elected school boards and teachers unions. Critics of cyber-charters warn that treating schools like businesses and their products will exacerbate existing inequities and foster deepening segregation on racial and class lines (DeJarnatt, 2013; Figueiredo-Brown, 2013).

### **Research Design**

This qualitative case study was designed to examine the experiences of former students who are economically disadvantaged and left their traditional schools to enroll in for-profit cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania and those of their learning coaches. A case study approach was selected because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of multiple cases that serve the purpose of illuminating a single issue (Cresswell, 2011). By describing and comparing the experiences of the participants, the study sought to provide a deeper understanding of how former students who are economically disadvantaged and their learning coaches perceived their experiences in cyber-charter schools.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study is that it only examined the experiences of five families who live within a single school district. The characteristics of this group are unique because of the socio-economic status, the culture, and the history of the area in which the group members reside. Results of this study are limited only by the experiences of the respondents. However, subjects who live in a different area may have had different

experiences and hold varying perceptions. The population of the study may not be a true representative sample of all cyber-charter students in the state. Another limitation is that there is extremely limited cultural diversity within the sample population. All participants were White, and the district they come from is 97.9% White (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). So, while they are representative of the district's population, they are not representative of the state's diversity.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Economically Disadvantaged:* Pennsylvania students in grades K-12, who qualify for free or reduced lunch (Kids Count Data Center, 2015).

*Learning Coaches:* Parent or primary caregiver who is responsible for supervising the cyber-charter student in the home (Saul, 2013).

*Cyber-Charter School:* An independent public school established and operated under a charter from the Department of Education which uses technology in order to provide a significant portion of its curriculum and to deliver a significant portion of its instruction to its students through the Internet or other electronic means (Huerta et al., 2006 p.27).

*Educational Management Organization:* For-profit business that provides management and curriculum services to for-profit and not-for-profit cyber-charter schools. They are active in government lobbying efforts and use advertising to promote their schools (DeJarnatt, 2013).

*Synchronous Learning:* Learning that occurs in a real time virtual classroom environment. Facilitated by a teacher or paraprofessional, students have the ability to interact with the teacher and each other (Huerta et al., 2006).

*Asynchronous Learning:* Learning that occurs when students complete assignments and learning on their own time and schedule without interaction with the teacher (CREDO, 2015).

*District Cyber-Charter Schools:* Cyber-charter schools developed and operated by individual school districts, usually for the purpose of keeping cyber-charter students in the district (Davis, 2014).

### **Summary**

Cyber-charter enrollment in Pennsylvania is growing rapidly (Baker & Miron, 2015; Hendricsen, 2014). The law that authorizes cyber-charter schools was enacted to offer educational choice to students in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Increasingly, students are taking advantage of that choice. The three largest cyber-charters schools in the state are all for-profit ventures. These three schools account for 77% of all students enrolled in cyber-charter schools (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). All three schools (Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, Commonwealth Connections Academy, and Agora Cyber Charter School) employ expensive advertising campaigns and aggressive marketing tactics that feature the words *free tuition* prominently. These three schools also enroll a higher percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged than do public schools in Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). When a student leaves his home school to attend a cyber-charter school, he also leaves behind a support structure. A student needs to be motivated and to be provided with support from family to be successful in an online environment where he chooses his own time to interact with the curriculum (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013; Hendricsen, 2014). Some students who are economically disadvantaged are not self-

motivated and do not receive the family support at home (Cooper-Parham, 2015). Online education can be difficult and even though certain characteristics are known to be critical for success for online learners, cyber-charter schools do not screen learners to determine these characteristics (Carnahan & Fulton, 2009). The intent of the study was to determine how well former students who are economically disadvantaged and left their home schools progressed in the cyber-charter environment. Another focus was to determine the level of support cyber-charter students received from their school and from their homes and how these factors impacted their ability to succeed in school. Finally, the study attempted to identify the perceptions of former cyber-charter students and their learning coaches of the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in cyber-charter schools. Once common themes began to emerge in the study, these themes were examined through the multiple paradigm approach to the ethics of education.

Chapter Two of this study includes an extensive literature review that discusses the history of cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania. The researcher then lists and examines the emerging themes from the current literature.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The number of students enrolled in cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania is growing exponentially (Baker & Miron, 2015; Hendricsen, 2014). During the 2015-2016 school year, 51% of cyber-charter students were classified as economically disadvantaged (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016) which means that more than half of all cyber-charter students in Pennsylvania are at-risk as defined by Barbour and Siko (2010). Further analysis shows that 77% of this majority attends one of the three largest for-profit cyber-charter schools in the state (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). Currently, there is little research on the effectiveness of cyber-charter schools, and research on achievement of students who are economically disadvantaged is even more finite (Cooper-Parham, 2015; Hendricsen, 2014). There are studies that show positive student achievement in cyber-charter schools (Barbour & Plough, 2009; Darrow, 2010; Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2004; Wiley, 2009) and those that show lack of achievement (Anthony, 2015; Carr-Chelman & Marsh, 2009; Cooper-Parham, 2015; CREDO, 2015; Herold, 2015). With the increasing amounts of public money being spent on cyber-charter schools, there is a growing demand that the costs of cyber-charter schools should be based on the actual costs of educating children, rather than providing a profit for educational management companies and other vendors (DeJarnatt, 2013).

Few researchers have explored the virtual experience through the eyes of those who live through it (Cooper-Parham, 2015 p. 8). The purpose of this study was to discover students' and their learning coaches' perceptions of their experiences in cyber-charter schools. Barbour and Siko (2010) stated that while students who are economically

disadvantaged make up a significant percentage of the students enrolled in cyber-charter schools, they are almost non-existent in the research literature. This literature review will examine four themes that emerged from the literature regarding students who are economically disadvantaged and their success in cyber-charter school. The four themes are: the need for support at school and at home, the achievement gap, a new type of learning, and the business model. The description of these four themes will provide insight into current issues surrounding the for-profit cyber-charter landscape.

### **History of Cyber-Charter Schools in Pennsylvania**

Pennsylvania became the 27<sup>th</sup> state to approve charter school reform in 1997 (Huerta et al., 2006). Act 22 called for school districts to pay tuition for their students who opted to attend cyber-charter schools. As the number of cyber-charter schools began to multiply, school districts refused to make the tuition payments (Brady et al., 2010). In response, the state began to withhold the tuition payments from the refusing school districts. The Pennsylvania School Board Association brought a lawsuit requesting an injunction to prevent the state from withholding cyber-charter school payments from its member districts. Their request was denied in 2001 (Huerta et al., 2006). In 2002, Act 88, which legalized and defined cyber-charter schools and increased the involvement of state government in charter schools, was passed (Huerta et al., 2006). Brady et al. (2010) called Pennsylvania's charter school law one of the most comprehensive in the country. Several defining lawsuits have been filed involving cyber-charter schools and most of them were decided in Pennsylvania (Brady et al., 2010). Pennsylvanian case law has determined that the Pennsylvania Department of Education can withhold cyber-charter payments from school districts, that schools do not have to pay for kindergarten students

who enroll in cyber-charter schools, and that cyber-charter students are eligible to take part in their local school's extra-curricular offerings if their cyber-charter school does not offer the activities (Brady et al., 2010).

### **Emerging Themes from the Literature**

As cyber-charter student numbers have grown, so have the number of studies that have been undertaken to determine if online learning is as effective as the instruction that students receive in traditional schools (CREDO, 2015). Of particular concern is the success rates of students labeled at-risk because they are economically disadvantaged. As increasing numbers of cyber-charter schools opened across the country, researchers were able to examine different aspects of students' cyber-charter experiences and how those experiences impacted the ability of students to complete courses and succeed in a cyber-school environment. A careful review of the literature pointed to four themes regarding the success of students who are economically disadvantaged in cyber-charter schools:

- 1) Cyber-charter students who are economically disadvantaged tend to be more successful when they are provided adequate support at home and from their schools.
- 2) Cyber-charter students do not achieve academically at the same rate as their peers in traditional schools.
- 3) Students who are economically disadvantaged face a new type of learning in order to achieve success in a cyber-charter environment.
- 4) Some for-profit cyber-charter schools are more concerned about enrollment numbers than the suitability of the child for their program.

## **The Need for Support at School and Home**

Several scholars have conducted studies that attempted to describe the ideal cyber-charter student. Hendriksen (2014) and Barbour (2006) found that studies over the past decade have described a successful student in a cyber-school environment as one who is an independent learner, is self-motivated, has time management skills, is a good writer, and is comfortable working on a computer. To help identify predictive learner characteristics that would lead to course completion in cyber-charter school, Roblyer and Marshall (2003) developed the Educational Success Prediction Instrument. Using this instrument to measure participants in their study, they found that successful students showed evidence of initiative, organization, and self-confidence. These personal characteristics of the individual learner are highly correlated to student success (Hendriksen, 2014).

While these descriptions are helpful in determining the characteristics required of students succeeding in an online environment, not all cyber-charter students possess these attributes. In order to increase their chances of being successful, students who are economically disadvantaged need to have access to different types of support, including academic and emotional support in school (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013). In fact, they need the same type of services as their peers who remained in traditional schools (Cooper-Parham, 2015).

Chi-Yuan and Rueda (2012), Cooper-Parham (2015), and Hendriksen (2014) stated that the biggest disparity between cyber-charter schools and traditional schools is the lack of face-to-face interaction between the student and the teacher, which can become an impediment to learning. Darrow (2010) maintained that in order to support

students who are economically disadvantaged, cyber-charter schools need to communicate with both parents and students. This communication should be accomplished through phone calls and synchronous classes. The frequency and nature of these contacts can determine the quality of the relationship between the school and the student who is economically disadvantaged. Instructors need to answer student questions in a timely manner and grade submissions promptly. These types of support have the ability to create positive feelings within the cyber-charter student. These positive feelings, in turn, can lead to increased student engagement (Ash, 2011). If school personnel can offer quality interaction often, that interaction significantly increases the odds of success for students who are economically disadvantaged (Hawkins, Graham, Sudweeks, & Barbour, 2013). Kember (1989) listed a number of strategies that teachers use to influence student success in an online program. They included frequent contacts with students, speedy responses to students' questions, use of online tutorials, and synchronous communications as methods that online teachers can employ to help their students succeed in their educational program. Davis (2011) stated that adding a layer of socialization could make the difference between success and failure in a cyber-charter student's experience. Commonwealth Connections Academy, the third largest cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania, works to promote this student interaction through the use of a mobile science classroom which visits different communities. Commonwealth Connections also provides in-person and online clubs, takes students on educational field trips, and engages them in statewide service projects (Davis, 2011). Figueiredo-Brown (2013) listed the attributes of an ideal cyber-charter school as one in which:

- 1) Students use technology to become collaborators in their learning.

- 2) Students participate in the kind of inclusive and challenging conversation that will help build their vocabulary and develop their thinking.
- 3) Technology allows students to form diverse online communities of learners that will expand their horizons (p. 92).

Cooper-Parham (2015) described an ideal cyber-charter school for students who are economically disadvantaged as one which provides a supportive faculty and staff. This idealized school would develop a personalized learning environment for each student enrolled based on the student's interests and skills. Teachers would use only instructional strategies that support student achievement. This ideal school would also provide all the student health, guidance, and emotional supports present in public schools.

The International Association for K-12 Learning (INACOL), a leading advocate for online schooling, recognizes the need to support students in its *National Standards for Quality Online Education*. The Instructional Strategies and Activities Standard states that an online course will

provide multiple opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the content that includes meaningful and authentic learning experiences such as collaborative learning groups, student-led review sessions, games, analysis or reactions to videos, discussions, concept mapping, analyzing case studies, etc. (INACOL, 2011 p. 8).

As it becomes more apparent that student-teacher interactions are a needed support for students who are economically disadvantaged, Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver (2006) reported that the course management systems utilized by many cyber-charter schools are configured to marginalize teacher input and concentrate on student statistics. This

marginalization limits the support that teachers may offer their students. Barbour and Plough (2009) stated that the lack of interaction among teachers and students is a shortfall in the cyber environment. In some cyber-charter schools, the environment is limited to the curriculum the students interact with because there is nothing else for the student to experience (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013). While many cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania meet the INACOL standard on instructional strategies and activities, some are simple platforms that offer only asynchronous lessons and offer very little opportunity for face-to-face interaction with teachers (Barbour & Plough, 2009).

Figueiredo-Brown (2013) maintained that students who are economically disadvantaged also need support in their homes to be successful in cyber-charter schools. However, these students are less likely to be able to get that help from family or friends. The particular focus of this study is on students who are economically disadvantaged; these students are defined by their inclusion in the free and reduced lunch program in their schools (Kids Count Data Center, 2015). Students who live in poverty have been classified as being *at-risk*. According to Barbour and Siko (2010) students at-risk can be defined by the following characteristics:

1. From a low socio-economic background
2. From a single-parent family
3. An older sibling dropped out of school
4. Changed schools more than twice because of relocation
5. Attained an average grade of C or lower in grades six through eight
6. Has repeated a grade (p.6).

Many students who are economically disadvantaged struggle with more than one of these issues. Single parents of students who are economically disadvantaged often work long

hours and cannot act as learning coaches during times when their children are doing schoolwork (Borup, Stevens, & Hasler-Waters, 2015). Without this parental support, the student is left to himself to go online and complete assignments (Borup, 2016). Some cyber-charter learning coaches found that online school involves a time commitment they were not ready to make (Hasler-Waters, Barbour, & Menchaca, 2014). Some cyber-charter students are juggling work and school or are caring for a new infant (Barbour & Plough, 2009). In other cases, learning coaches do not speak the dominant language of the school and cannot help their children (Hendricsen, 2014). Litke (1998) stated that parental engagement is crucial in improving student outcomes. This lack of home support has the potential to put these students at a disadvantage. Many cyber-charter students may find themselves in these circumstances. Any combination has the potential to negatively affect their performance in the cyber-charter environment.

Upon review of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies' findings about the characteristics of the ideal cyber-student, consideration should be given to the fact that over half of the students enrolled in Pennsylvania cyber-charter schools are economically disadvantaged (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). For many of them, poverty is not the only issue that they face. Without some form of support, a student who is economically disadvantaged is less likely to be successful than a peer who remains in traditional school (McClure-Lautenslager, 2015). Hendricsen's (2014) study determined that students who are economically disadvantaged and left traditional school because they wanted to work at their own pace were less successful in cyber-charter schools than their peers who remained in traditional schools. The literature suggests that cyber-charter students who are economically disadvantaged also need more than home

support; they need support from their school as well (Barbour & Siko, 2010; Cooper-Parham, 2015). The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO) completed a comprehensive longitudinal study of Pennsylvanian cyber-charter schools. The results suggested that Pennsylvanian cyber-charter schools might be limited in their ability to provide academic and emotional support for students who are economically disadvantaged (CREDO, 2015).

### **The Achievement Gap**

As the public expenditures on cyber-charter schools grow, so does the demand for accountability, especially from the people representing local school districts who are forced to forgo tax revenue in favor of the cyber-charters in a manner in which they have no control (Huerta et al., 2006). A review of the literature reveals studies that show cyber-charter students achieve academic success at an equal or better rate than students in traditional schools (Barbour & Plough, 2009; Darrow, 2010; Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2004; Wiley, 2009). Other studies contend that cyber-charter students are achieving academically at a much lower level than their peers who remained in traditional classrooms (Anthony, 2015; Carr-Chelman & Marsh, 2009; Cooper-Parham, 2015; CREDO, 2015; Herold, 2015; Hasler-Waters et al., 2014).

There is mixed evidence as to whether enrolling in a cyber-charter school impacts a student positively, negatively, or if it makes a difference at all (Barkovich, 2014). In his two-year study of achievement in a Californian cyber-charter school, Darrow (2010) found that when compared to a similar cohort of students from a brick-and-mortar school, cyber-charter students scored above the state average on the California Language Arts Test, but scored lower than traditional students who took the same test. Darrow's (2010)

study also found that cyber-charter students dropped out at a much higher rate than traditional students during the years 2007-2009.

Shachar and Neumann (2003) performed a meta-analysis of 86 studies conducted from 1990-2002 that included over 15,000 participants. Their findings show that fully two thirds of online students achieved at a higher rate than those students in traditional schools. Smith, Clark, and Blomeyer, (2004) also reported in their study that cyber-charter students achieved at an equal or higher rate than traditional brick-and-mortar students. Hendricsen's (2014) study compared the course completion rates of 3,054 high school students from a suburban school district in Arizona. The study compared students enrolled in two traditional high schools to the district's cyber-charter school students during the 2010-2011 school year. The results of the study showed that the cyber-charter students completed significantly fewer courses than their peers in the traditional high schools. While the course completion rate of the traditional students was 96% compared to 31% for the cyber-charter students, there was no significant difference between the course completion rates of cyber-charter students who were economically disadvantaged and their non-disadvantaged cyber-charter peers. As Barkovich (2014) contends, the limited evidence is mixed as to whether students learn better in the online environment or not.

Pennsylvania grades each of its schools every year. In October, the state updates the School Performance Profile (SPP), a website that tracks performance indicators and assigns a numerical grade to every school in the state. The overall score is determined by student achievement, graduation rates, grade level growth, and attendance among other factors. A score of 70 or above is considered to be proficient. Any score below 70

requires a school to submit a school improvement plan. Table 3 summarizes the cyber-charter schools currently operating in Pennsylvania during the 2015-2016 school year. Table 3 includes total enrollment figures for each school, what percentage of each school's population can be classified as economically disadvantaged (ED), the Drop Out Rate (DOR), which describes what percentage of each senior class did not graduate, and the overall SPP score. What is notable about these scores is that no cyber-charter school in the state scored above proficient during the 2015-2016 school year. Table 4 lists the same data from the 2014-2015 school year. In 2015, the state changed from reporting cohort graduation rates to drop out rates. What is also notable is that the graduation rates of cyber-charter students were significantly lower than the graduation rates of traditional seniors during both years (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016).

Table 3

*Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter School Demographics 2015-2016*

Cyber-Charter School	Enroll	%ED	DOR	SSP
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Cyber Charter School	827	16.57	4.92	62.1
Achievement House Cyber School	553	70.52	18.42	54.5
ACT Academy Cyber Charter School	111	87.39	1.17	40.0
Agora Cyber Charter School	8536	70.07	1.17	37.7
Aspira Bilingual Cyber-Charter School	239	62.76	8.7	40.4
Central PA Digital Learning Foundation	187	65.24	3.48	47.6
Commonwealth Connections Academy	9034	51.38	3.41	47.5
Education Plus Academy	432	47.92	.0	54.1
Esperanza Cyber Charter School	149	93.29	9.71	51.4
Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School	9173	34.23	10.61	52.5
Pennsylvania Distance Learning	475	32.63	.0	54.1
Pennsylvania Leadership Cyber Charter	2419	52.42	8.0	57.4
Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School	2365	60.34	1.96	49.8
Susq-Cyber Charter School	103	64.08	37.29	49.5

Table 4

*Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter School Demographics 2014-2015*

Cyber-Charter School	Enroll	%ED	DOR	SSP
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Cyber Charter School	845	14.67	69.09	69.2
Achievement House Cyber School	85	69.27	45.73	44.8
ACT Academy Cyber Charter School	110	100.0	21.74	36.1
Agora Cyber Charter School	9290	72.31	54.58	46.4
Aspira Bilingual Cyber-Charter School	139	95.68	8.99	38.4
Central PA Digital Learning Foundation	181	37.02	32.26	39.3
Commonwealth Connections Academy	8768	52.63	72.73	48.4
Education Plus Academy	751	53.93	n/a	n/a
Esperanza Cyber Charter School	110	86.36	31.7	0
Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School	9344	26.7	65.3	60.6
Pennsylvania Distance Learning	534	15.36	n/a	n/a
Pennsylvania Leadership Cyber Charter	2444	53.52	54.7	78.9
Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School	2482	56.73	64.6	77.21
Susq-Cyber Charter School	118	66.1	45.5	32.9

Table 5 lists the School Performance Profile scores of the cyber-charter schools since the advent of the School Performance Profile. In the last three years, no cyber-charter school in the state of Pennsylvania has passed the 70-point threshold that marks proficient academic achievement (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016).

Table 5

*Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter School Performance Profile Scores*

Cyber-Charter School	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Cyber Charter School	66.5	66.0	69.2	62.1
Achievement House Cyber School	39.7	37.5	44.8	54.5
ACT Academy Cyber Charter School	30.6	28.9	36.1	40.0
Agora Cyber Charter School	48.3	42.4	46.4	37.7
Aspira Bilingual Cyber-Charter School	29.0	39.0	38.4	40.4
Central PA Digital Learning Foundation	31.7	48.8	39.3	47.6

Commonwealth Connections Academy	54.6	52.2	48.4	47.5
Education Plus Academy	39.0	50.0	n/a	67.9
Esperanza Cyber Charter School	32.7	47.7	31.7	51.4
Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School	59.4	55.5	60.58	52.5
Pennsylvania Distance Learning	54.7	50.9	49.2	54.1
Pennsylvania Leadership Cyber Charter	64.7	59.3	78.95	57.4
Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School	67.9	63.4	77.21	49.8
Susq-Cyber Charter School	46.4	42.0	32.86	49.5

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Since the advent of cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania, the academic achievement of their students has been very low as measured by the Keystone Exam and the PSSA tests (Cooper-Parham, 2015). Attending a cyber-charter school leads to lessened academic growth for the average student (CREDO, 2015 p. 23). According to an investigative reporting piece in the New York Times about Agora Cyber Charter School, the second largest cyber-charter school in the state, 60% of students were one grade level behind in math while 50% were one grade level behind in reading. In addition, one third of their students did not graduate on time or at all (Saul, 2011). Anthony (2015) found that students who remain in brick-and-mortar schools achieve academically at a significantly higher rate than cyber-charter students. Reading scores of 2,729 full time cyber-charter students dropped 6% in one year in Colorado (Hasler-Waters et al, 2014). In his study of Californian cyber-charter students, Darrow (2010) found that the rates of online courses that were not completed were between 20% and 50% higher than traditional courses over the two years of the study.

Reviewing the literature about student achievement in cyber-charter schools brought to mind the classic argument of which came first the chicken or the egg? Are cyber-charter students doing poorly on achievement tests because they are not being properly educated, or are they doing poorly on achievement tests because of factors and

characteristics they bring to cyber-charter schools when they enroll? Opponents of cyber-charter schools point to these studies to illustrate the fact that students who enroll in online schools, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged, are not doing as well as students who remain in traditional schools (CREDO, 2015). These critics imply that the reason for this discrepancy is that cyber-charters do not educate students as successfully as traditional schools. Proponents of cyber-charter schools can argue that they have absorbed a large influx of students who are economically disadvantaged over the last few years. These students are products of public education and for a wide variety of reasons have opted to enroll in cyber-charter school. They enrolled at the academic level they had completed and brought with them any learning or behavior problems that had manifested during their traditional school experience (CREDO, 2015; Hendriksen, 2014). These issues would affect a student's level of achievement in either environment, and to blame cyber-charter schools for deficits that students developed prior to enrollment is unfair (Flurie, Barnett, & Rossetti, 2015). The fact that so many students who are economically disadvantaged are enrolling in cyber-charter schools confirms that the cyber charter schools are succeeding in advertising their programs to the economically disadvantaged (Cooper-Parham, 2015). Commonwealth Connections Academy, the third largest cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania, saw a 40% to 60% enrollment surge in 2012 (Niederberger, 2012). Those students' scores were included in the SPP score posted by Commonwealth Connections Academy, but some of those students had only been there for a few months. As cyber-charter schools enroll an increasing number of students who are economically disadvantaged, these schools will need to offer support systems to mitigate issues these students encounter if they want to

keep them enrolled (Figuieredo-Brown, 2013). The next section examines the literature to discover some issues that students face as they move from the regimented world of public school to the unstructured environment of cyber-charter school. Issues that students could face include: learning new material in a new way that requires new skills, conflict with learning coaches, and home variables that can impede the progress of a cyber-charter student.

### **A New Type of Learning**

Students who are economically disadvantaged and leave their traditional brick-and-mortar schools to attend cyber-charter schools have to change the way in which they learn (Borup, 2016, Cooper-Parham, 2015). This new type of learning is a big adjustment that can become a hardship for some students. They may go from a strictly regimented public school program to a schoolwork schedule that is determined either with input from learning coaches or not. This change of pace can be particularly difficult for a teenager whose work habits are set in stone and who usually follows the path of least resistance (Barbour, 2006). Cooper-Parham (2015) has labeled this friction students experience as they adapt to a new learning environment *Dissonant Study Orchestration*. The difference between classroom instruction and online instruction can cause problems for new students who have not yet experienced an online learning environment. Studebaker (2011) found a strong student preference for the traditional classroom setting due to the interactive nature of that environment. Students go from an interactive school and classroom with hundreds of human interactions each day to a day in front of the computer interacting in a virtual world. They are also asked to use new skills that were not part of the curriculum at their traditional school (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013). This new type of

learning can be a difficult transition for some students to make. Even when covering the same material as they would in traditional school, cyber-charter students can find learning the same material more difficult in this new environment (Borup, 2016).

An issue that sometimes confronts cyber-students and their learning coaches is conflict. Cyber-charter schools have less concern with “difficult” students because teachers have only virtual contact and count on the learning coach to be responsible for the direct contact with the student (DeJarnatt, 2013). However, behavioral problems do not disappear with the change of venue. Learning coaches who had conflict issues with their children prior to enrollment in cyber-charter school will likely see these issues occur more often as they spend more time with their children, particularly in a supervisory capacity (Borup, 2016). This conflict can range from mild irritation to open defiance.

Another serious issue that students who are economically disadvantaged in cyber-charter schools face is the value placed on education in the home. Hendrickson (2012) stated that some students who are economically disadvantaged do not value the education provided by the school. These students observe the current job market where they live and do not see jobs that require an education. This perception can lead to student disengagement and misunderstandings with the teacher. Ash (2011) summarized this mindset when she stated that education is not high on the priority list of some students who are economically disadvantaged. When education is not valued in the home and parents and/or older siblings have dropped out, students can find it difficult to stay motivated and engaged.

Other issues students who are economically disadvantaged face can be summarized as *home variables*. According to Hendricsen (2014), these following variables are often

cited as contributors to increasing students' risk of failure in cyber-charter school: low socio-economic status, minority group status, single head of household, low educational attainment of parents, mobility, gender, and limited English language proficiency (p.19).

This list is only a partial explanation of the many different reasons why students who are economically disadvantaged are put at a learning disadvantage in cyber-charter schools. Students might be struggling with illness, caring for aging relatives, or raising a new infant. The reasons are numerous, but the effect is usually negative for the student (Barbour, 2006).

### **The Business Model**

Cyber-charter schooling is a multi-million-dollar industry. Cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania have grown exponentially over the last five years (DeJarnatt, 2013). When students leave their home school for cyber-charter school, the per-pupil cost to the district to educate that child must be paid by the district to the cyber-charter school. To cover these added costs, local districts need to set aside larger portions of their budgets that are already stretched thin due to budget cuts enacted in 2010. The three largest cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter School, Agora Cyber-Charter School, and Commonwealth Connections Academy) all operate as for-profit businesses and currently enroll 77% of all Pennsylvania cyber-charter students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). Because more than 50% of those students are economically disadvantaged, that group of people must be examined to determine how this segment of the population fares in the for-profit cyber environment. Proponents of cyber-charter schools claim they represent the educational delivery system of the future and they can provide a much more flexible student-centered education to

their students. This delivery system rivals what they would receive if they stayed in their home school (Wiley, 2009). They maintain that corporate efficiencies combined with the connectivity of the Internet have the potential to change public education, offering high quality at a reduced cost (Saul, 2011). The cyber-charter school vs. the traditional school debate is about money as much as it is about how students are best educationally served (DeJarnatt, 2013).

Most for-profit cyber-charter schools pay a management fee to a separate for-profit company who provides curriculum or management services or both (DeJarnatt, 2013). The range of services these EMOs (Educational Management Organizations) offer vary from state to state and from contract to contract. Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter School, the largest cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania, contracted with National Network of Digital Schools (NNDS), a spin-off company. The mission of NNDS is to provide curriculum and management support to cyber-charters across the country. However, Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School remains its main client and pays over \$30 million annually. The contract between Pennsylvania Cyber Charter and NNDS calls for:

1. General business advice regarding operation and management of the school and its resources
2. Negotiate agreements on behalf of the school and to carry out and implement the purpose of the school
3. Assist the school with accounting records and operational policies
4. Provide assistance to the school with legal counsel and auditors as may be required
5. Provide staff development and human resource services

6. Marketing school services for the purpose of increasing enrollment
7. Procurement, shipping, and transportation service
8. Provide physical plant and information technology services (De Jarnatt, 2013. p. 1)

Concerns arise because of the lack of accountability when public funds are spent on management fees to a private company that does not have to release its budget or financial information to the public (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013; Hasler-Waters, et al., 2014).

K-12 Inc. is the largest for-profit EMO in the country (Saul, 2011). The company posted earnings of \$848.2 million for the 2012-2013 school year, which reflected a 19.7% increase from the year before (K-12 Inc., 2013). K-12 spent \$26.5 million in advertising in 2010 (Saul, 2011). The company calls lobbying a core competency, although no information about amounts spent have been made public (Saul, 2011). The Chicago Public Schools hired K-12 to provide a cyber-charter remediation and credit recovery program. They paid \$600,000.00 to K-12 to provide this program (Sanchez, 2016). After analyzing the program, the district determined that the cyber-charter courses were more expensive than offering face-to-face classes would have been (Sanchez, 2016). Cyber-charter school proponents defend the EMOs by explaining that all public schools contract with for-profit providers. They report that cyber-charter school costs make up less than 1% of education funding in Pennsylvania, and that public schools complain about cyber-charters so they can raise taxes (McCorry, 2014). Others claim that natural competition, the profit motive, and the freedom from government bureaucracies allow these private

management companies to provide more value for the money than traditional management structures (Carr-Chellman & Marsh, 2009).

According to a research brief undertaken by the National Education Policy Center, there are four major policy concerns they have identified in regard to for-profit cyber-charter schools:

- 1) A substantial share of public expenditure intended for the delivery of direct educational services to children is being extracted inadvertently or intentionally for personal or business financial gain, creating substantial inefficiencies.
- 2) Public assets are being unnecessarily transferred to private hands, at public expense, risking the future provision of “public” education.
- 3) Charter school operators are growing highly-endogenous, self-serving private entities built on funds derived from lucrative management fees and rent extraction which further compromise the future provision of “public” education.
- 4) Current disclosure requirements make it unlikely that any related legal violations, ethical concerns, or merely bad policies and practices are not realized until clever investigative reporting, whistleblowers, or litigation brings them to light (Baker & Miron, 2015, p. 3).

Hasler-Waters et al. (2014) would contribute as a fifth policy concern the fact that the dropout rates of cyber-charter schools are higher than traditional schools.

These criticisms have not developed in a vacuum. When taxpayers became aware that Pennsylvanian tax dollars were being paid to out-of-state providers for curriculum,

management, and advertising, calls for greater accountability became louder (Hasler-Waters et al., 2014). Where financial improprieties were suspected, investigative journalists began looking for a story. In a revealing article in the New York Times, Stephanie Saul outlined concerns she had discovered at Agora Cyber-Charter School, the second largest cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania. After interviewing former and current employees, Ms. Saul detailed unsavory practices she claimed were common at Agora, which used K-12 as its educational management company at that time. Among other charges leveled at Agora, Saul reported that teachers felt pressure to pass students who did little work, that students were allowed to make up late work with no penalty, that students were kept on rosters after they had stopped logging on so the school could continue to collect for them, and that bonuses were paid to employees who brought in the most enrollees (Saul, 2011). DeJarnatt (2013) put the teacher-to-student ratio at Agora Cyber Charter School at 50:1. Fewer teachers mean fewer costs, and teachers' salaries are the largest component of any school budget. Students who are economically disadvantaged might need additional support systems to be successful and the most effective support is teacher feedback. A lack of teachers calls into question how much time an Agora teacher has to develop relationships with students (DeJarnatt, 2013). Agora Cyber Charter School brought in \$72 million in 2011 (Saul, 2011). This money was completely generated by taxes paid by Pennsylvanians.

Another area of contention faced by cyber-charter schools is concern about money spent on advertising. K-12 spent \$26.5 million on advertising in 2010 (Saul, 2011). Anthony (2015) explained that "Dollars spent to advertise and sell the cool and tech savvy aspects of online education are aimed at market penetration" (p. 12). Many cyber-

charter schools specifically target students who are economically disadvantaged. These schools claim in their advertising that they are ready to educate and support students with unique needs (Barbour, 2009). Anthony (2015) stated that if cyber-charter schools do not provide accurate performance data to support their claims, prospective students may sign up for the school with the most attractive advertising. Large cyber-charters devote significant resources to advertising and marketing (DeJarnatt, 2013). Opponents of cyber-charters would argue that this is money that was paid as taxes to fund education. Their stance would be that purchasing large radio and television advertising campaigns from out-of-state vendors is not an ethical use of public money and does nothing to educate children (Hasler-Waters et al., 2014).

The cyber-charter industry in Pennsylvania was supported by former governor, Tom Corbett (Bielke, 2014, White, 2017). His Budget Secretary, Charles Zogby, was a former Vice-President of Education and Policy for K-12 prior to his joining the administration (Saul, 2011). The Education Committee Co-Chair Joel Greenberg was a former hedge fund manager who helped found a school choice political action committee with an initial bankroll of \$5 million (Bielke, 2014). Vahan Gureghian, who is CEO of a company that owns 50 charter schools in nine states, gave \$330,000.00 to Corbett's re-election campaign (Bielke, 2014). Governor Corbett supported the for-profit school movement completely. Since the election of Governor Tom Wolfe, no new cyber-charter schools have been approved.

The public perception of large cyber-charters as good stewards of public funds is not helped when the two largest cyber-charter schools in the state, Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter School and Agora Cyber-Charter School, have had top officials indicted as a

result of questionable business practices (Ove, 2016). The former CEO of Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School was indicted on conspiracy and fraud charges relating to business practices (Ove, 2016). In August of 2016, he was found guilty of conspiracy for siphoning \$8 million of taxpayer money into other business ventures to avoid paying taxes (Ove, 2016). The founder of Agora Cyber-Charter School was also indicted for fraud resulting from questionable business practices (DeJarnatt, 2013). Accused of making fraudulent payments from Agora Cyber-Charter School to an EMO that she controlled, the founder's first trial ended in a "hung" jury. Her re-trial has been suspended because she suffers from dementia and has been ruled incompetent to stand trial (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012). The result of these incidents is that the public perception of the largest cyber-charter schools in the state has been damaged because they have stolen money that was collected from the community for the purpose of educating children (DeJarnatt, 2013). Cyber-charter schools are vulnerable to misappropriation of funds from greedy individuals because they have no local Board of Directors to whom they must answer. There are no geographical boundaries to cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania. The population of each school is dispersed, which makes it difficult to meet to discuss parent or district concerns (DeJarnatt, 2013; Huerta et al., 2006).

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

There are mixed results in studies that measure the academic achievement of students enrolled in cyber-charter schools as compared to achievement results of their same age peers who remained in traditional schools. Opponents of cyber-charter schools point to low scores on the Pennsylvania School Performance Profile and claim that taxpayers are

wasting money on cyber-charters because they are not educating children (Feinberg, 2016). Proponents of cyber-charter schools counter with the argument that they represent a revolution in the way education is offered to students (Ellis, 2008). They will further argue that their schools have doubled in size over the last five years and are experiencing growing pains. These proponents will contend that the students who enrolled with them were public school students first and their achievement reflects more on their achievement in traditional school than what they have learned in cyber-charter school (CREDO, 2015). In an open letter to the public, the Chief Executive Officers of three for-profit cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania wrote that for many families, cyber-charter schools are the only avenue for an acceptable public education. Cyber-charter students tried public education, and it did not work for them (Flurie, Barnett, & Rosetti, 2015). The data show the largest concentration of students are in grades seven through nine and frequently arrive performing at below grade level (Flurie et al., 2015). Many researchers (Cooper-Parham, 2015; Figueiredo-Brown, 2013; Hendricsen, 2014) agree that students who are economically disadvantaged are at a greater risk for failure in cyber-charter schools. They argue that support systems must be provided in the home and in school to help students who are economically disadvantaged overcome barriers that their peers who are not disadvantaged do not experience. These same researchers advocate for some type of screening procedures to ensure a proper fit for cyber-charter students and their programs. A large percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are enrolled in the large for-profit cyber schools. These schools purposely gear their advertising to reach this market segment. The lack of progress of this large important group calls for policy makers to use the Multiple

Paradigm Approach of ethics to determine if the large for-profit cyber charter schools are working in the best interests of their students.

### **Summary**

The research on the effectiveness of cyber-charter schools is mixed. There are studies that extol the virtues of cyber-charter schools and studies that find that they are not as effective as brick-and-mortar schools. Cyber-charter enrollment continues to rise in Pennsylvania. Act 22 was passed in 1997 and opened the door to cyber-charter schools. Funding controversies ensued, which led to the passing of Act 88 of 2002, which increased the role of government in regulating cyber-charter schools. A review of the literature points to four emerging themes: the need for support at school and at home, the achievement gap, a new type of learning, and the business model. Studies point to the need for support for students who are economically disadvantaged at school and at home to allow them to succeed in spite of issues they face. A review of the literature shows that more recent studies indicate that students who are economically disadvantaged do not achieve at the same level as those students who remain in traditional schools. Another issue for these students is that they may face additional issues that impede their ability to access the online curriculum, which may affect success rates. Finally, the three largest for-profit cyber-charter schools, which enroll 77% of Pennsylvania's online population, may consider profit above what is in the best interests of the students they serve.

Chapter Three discusses the methodology employed for the study. It includes a description of the population studied and how participants were selected. It also includes information on the piloting of the interview protocols and how the research results were analyzed

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study attempted to understand the cyber-charter school experience from the perspective of five former students and their learning coaches. Through in-depth interviews, the researcher sought to determine the supports that helped these students who are economically disadvantaged to succeed in cyber-charter schools and the distracters they faced. A qualitative approach was selected because interviews are a good source of information where the desire is to determine the perspective of an individual (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Taylor (2013) stated, “In essence, a case study explores, in detail, the insights of specific individuals’ or groups’ understandings of an issue or concern” (p.#39). The number of participants and their learning coaches were chosen because of the need to report details about each individual; including more than ten participants in the study runs the risk of becoming unwieldy, resulting in superficial perspectives (Cresswell, 2011). Emphasis was placed on discovering the ways in which students were supported within their homes, as well as methods teachers and schools implemented to support them. Learning coaches were asked about their experiences as primary educational providers working with their children. They were asked about their relationship with the cyber-charter school as consumers and if they were satisfied customers. The study attempted to discover how students who are economically disadvantaged functioned in this new online environment that integrates the home with the classroom and to determine how well students progressed in the cyber-charter environment and if their social and emotional needs were being met in their cyber-charter schools.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of five former students who are economically disadvantaged from south central Pennsylvania who left their traditional school to enroll in a for-profit cyber-charter school. The students' learning coaches' perceptions were also investigated to discover how they felt their students were served in the online environment. The research questions sought to discover if students and their learning coaches felt they were provided with the necessary support at home and from their cyber-charter school to be successful. The research questions also explored the perceptions of students and their learning coaches about the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in for-profit cyber-charter schools as opposed to remaining in their traditional schools. The intent of the study was to determine how well students who are economically disadvantaged and left their home schools progressed in the cyber-charter environment. As more taxpayer money goes into funding cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania, it should be determined if students who are economically disadvantaged and enrolled in a cyber-charter school and their learning coaches received the support needed to progress in that environment.

The three largest cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania operate as for-profit ventures. Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, Agora Cyber-Charter School, and Commonwealth Connections Academy all together currently enroll 77% of all cyber-charter students in the state (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). All three of these cyber-charter schools employ vigorous print, radio, and television advertising campaigns that feature the words *free tuition* prominently. All three cyber-charter schools

will provide a computer, monitor, and an Internet connection at no cost to the consumer. Considering the cost of the advertising campaigns promoting these cyber-charter schools, public school advocates are questioning whether the advertising for these schools is meeting a need or creating one (DeJarnatt, 2013). As state aid declines and districts are forced to trim their staffs through furloughs and attrition, there is mounting concern among school boards about the outlay of district funds used to pay cyber-charter school tuitions (Huerta et al., 2006). Many districts have developed their own cyber-school option in a bid to compete with the cyber-charters and to keep a portion of that money in-house (Davis, 2014; Niederberger, 2012). Still, with those measures in place, cyber-charter enrollment continues to rise.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of former students who chose to leave their brick-and-mortar school to attend a for-profit cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania in terms of their achievement and the support they received from their cyber-charter schools and in their homes?
2. What are the perceptions of learning coaches who were responsible for supervising students who enrolled in a for-profit cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania in terms of their students' learning and the support they received from the cyber-charter school?
3. What are the perceptions of students who left their brick-and-mortar schools to enroll in for-profit cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania and their learning coaches in

terms of the advantages and disadvantages of leaving traditional education for an online experience?

### **Target Population and Participant Selection**

It is difficult to identify students who attend cyber-charter schools (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013). Due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), schools are forbidden by law to divulge student information without consent of the student's parents and/or guardian (United States Department of Education, 2016). FERPA makes identifying a population for this study particularly problematic. The researcher chose to limit the population of the study to former students from the district in which he is employed because this population is impossible to identify without some prior knowledge of their existence. The district in which the researcher works is located in the south central region of Pennsylvania. It is a large, rural district. The total population of students who are economically disadvantaged in the district is 60.89%, which is 15.89% higher than the state average (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). The district's population is not culturally diverse with 97.9 % of the district population listed as White (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). In order to identify the potential population, the researcher applied for permission to conduct the study from both the school board and the superintendent of the district. Once permission was granted and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol was approved, the researcher approached the district business manager and requested a search of district student records for potential study participants who met the study criteria. Due to FERPA concerns, the researcher was not able to gather these data from the district itself. Potential participants had to be former students who were at least 18 years of age and left the

district to attend Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, Agora Cyber Charter School, or Commonwealth Connections Academy within the last five years. Once these students were identified, the list was then checked by the district Business Manager to determine which of these students qualified for free and reduced lunch. The eventual result of the participants' involvement in cyber-charter school was not considered as a relevant factor in the selection of participants. Their stories would hopefully shed some light on the reasons they were or were not successful. Once all students who met the criteria were identified, an invitation letter was mailed to each home by the district Business Manager requesting their participation in the study. After receiving no reply from the initial mailing, the researcher amended his IRB application and requested permission to offer a \$50.00 Walmart gift card for participating in the study. Once the change was approved by the IRB, the district Business Manager sent a follow-up letter. The letters were followed by a Facebook instant message from the researcher to any prospective former students who could be located online. The goal was to get five students who were willing to become involved in the study and share their experiences. Once students agreed to become involved in the study and identified their learning coaches, these individuals were also contacted and offered the same incentive. After all screening procedures, six eligible students and learning coaches expressed interest in becoming involved in the study. The first five that responded were interviewed.

### **Research Setting**

Once student participants were identified and agreed to be included in the study, the researcher individually interviewed each student who had attended a cyber-charter school. All of these tape-recorded interviews were conducted over the telephone. As part

of the protocol, students were asked to identify the person who was most responsible in the home for monitoring their online work. Once these learning coaches were identified, they were also interviewed over the telephone, or in one case in her home. Follow up interviews were conducted where necessary to clarify a point or get deeper input on unclear items.

### **Piloting the Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was first piloted informally by a group of seven doctoral candidates who all currently serve as educational administrators. Each question in the interview protocol was rated individually. Participants examined each item in terms of its ability to provide the necessary information to answer the research questions. Then, the group examined the instrument holistically to ensure that all research questions would be fully answered through the interview protocol. The focus of the exercise was to eliminate gaps and redundancies within the protocol. Suggestions were made to clarify, add, and delete questions. The instrument evolved as a result of that collaboration. Once the IRB approval was granted, a formal pilot of the instrument was undertaken. A sample interview was conducted with a student who met the requirements for inclusion in the study, but whose learning coach was not able to be interviewed. A sample interview was also conducted with a learning coach who was willing to take part in the study, but whose cyber student was not. The responses elicited during the sample interviews helped the researcher develop additional follow-up questions that allowed sharper focus on the basic research questions. In two cases, follow up questions became initial questions when the study interviews took place. In fact, as the interviews were conducted, the protocol underwent minor changes as the researcher became more attuned to the responses.

Because transcribing interviews was an ongoing process during the study, themes could be further probed as they emerged and were identified as the interviews progressed.

### **Research Procedures**

To start, a letter of request to participate in the study was sent by the district Business Manager to each eligible student. All interview questions were listed in the initial mailing in order for potential participants to make informed decisions about taking part in the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality by the researcher's use of pseudonyms to protect their identities. Once participants agreed to become involved in the study and consent letters were received, a call or e-mail message was sent to set a convenient day and time for the interview. The researcher also asked former student participants to identify their learning coaches so they could also be approached about being involved in the study. Interviews took place over the phone and in one case in a learning coach's home. The researcher took field notes during the interviews to help the transcription process. Students were asked 18 questions while caregivers were only asked 11. Follow up questions were asked to clarify points or elicit more detailed responses. All interviews were transcribed by the interviewer to facilitate an intimate knowledge of what transpired during each exchange. In three cases, participants were contacted after the interview to help clarify a point and to discuss follow up questions.

### **Analysis of Data**

All interviews were tape-recorded and notes were taken during the interviews. The researcher transcribed all interview recordings. As the transcription progressed, general ideas or themes that were present in two or more interviews were listed. After transcribing all interviews, a list of codes that corresponded to repeated ideas or themes

from the interviews was developed. Each code reduced text to a theme of people, places, or things (Creswell, 2011). Once these themes were identified, an initial topic list was developed and became the basis for coding all transcripts. All transcripts were loaded into NVivo and coded. During the coding process, several codes were dropped due to lack of data while others were added as data emerged. Next, the code summaries that included all pertinent data were printed. Once the summaries were complete, the researcher re-checked each summary to ensure all items were coded properly. Common items that occurred in each interview were identified, and these common threads became the evidence that informed the study's findings.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Once all interviews were completed, transcribed, and coded, the researcher began to sort the data. Next, triangulation was employed to compare student responses to caregiver responses, particularly with those students who attended the same cyber-charter school. By comparing responses from students and caregivers, evidence gathered could be corroborated to support the themes identified by the study and ensured reliability. The researcher also used member checking to establish validity. Copies of the typed transcripts were sent to the interview participants who were asked to go back and check if the typed interview was what was actually said. All participants believed the transcriptions were an accurate accounting of their interview. Finally, the emerging themes were compared to the existing literature.

### **Summary**

This qualitative case study examined the perceptions of former students who are economically disadvantaged from a poor, rural district in central Pennsylvania who left

their traditional school to enroll in one of the three biggest cyber-charter schools in the state. Through extensive interviews with the students and their learning coaches, the study attempted to see the experience through the eyes of those who experienced it. Particular emphasis was placed on the support students and their learning coaches received from their schools and teachers and in their homes. Also, the researcher attempted to understand the perceptions of students and their learning coaches about the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in for-profit cyber-charter schools as opposed to remaining in their traditional schools. Ultimately, five students and their learning coaches were interviewed. Seven doctoral students informally piloted the interview protocols. Once IRB approval was granted, a practice interview was conducted on both a student and learning coach not ultimately selected for the study. Interview questions continued to evolve over the course of the interviews. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Responses were then coded and entered into NVivo. Once code summaries were gathered, the researcher identified common themes that were present in the interviews. These themes were made clearer by the described perceptions of the participants. The study examines the experiences of the participants and uses their suggestions to explore ways the current cyber experience can be enhanced.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA AND ANALYSIS

This qualitative case study examined the perceptions of five former students who are economically disadvantaged and enrolled in a cyber-charter school and their learning coaches to determine whether or not they felt their educational needs were being met by their cyber-charter schools and if the online environment worked for them. The study also endeavored to discover the perceptions held by former students and their learning coaches about the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in a cyber-charter school. The study focused on students' and their learning coaches' perceptions of their experiences in cyber-charter school. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews with five students and the individuals who acted as their learning coaches in an effort to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of former students who chose to leave their brick-and-mortar school to attend a for-profit cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania in terms of their achievement and the support they received from their cyber-charter schools and in their homes?

2. What are the perceptions of learning coaches who were responsible for supervising students who enrolled in a for-profit cyber-charter school in Pennsylvania in terms of their students' learning and the support they received from the cyber-charter school?

3. What are the perceptions of students who left their brick-and-mortar schools to enroll in for-profit cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania and their learning coaches in

terms of the advantages and disadvantages of leaving traditional education for an online experience?

Three of the participant student/learning coach pairs in the study consisted of traditional student/parent relationships. The remaining two pairs were non-traditional in that the learning coach was not related to the student and was acting in a personal capacity in the student's life. All student participants were former students who had reached the age of 18 and had finished their schooling. All participants were identified by pseudonyms to protect their identities. All of the participants answered all questions posed by the researcher freely and without any hesitation. The cyber-charter schools that the students attended were also assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The following two sections will provide background information of the students, as well as their learning coaches. Understanding the students' and learning coaches' stories will help provide context to their cyber-charter school experiences and will provide some insight to the attitudes and opinions they express.

### **Students' Stories**

Shane is a student with special needs who left his public school at the end of his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. He was tired of getting up and going to school and he was having discipline issues, so he approached his mother and asked if he could enroll in cyber-charter school. His mother was not in favor of the move because she felt he should experience everything that a traditional school experience offers, especially the social aspects. She also worried about his motivation to complete school work on his own. He continued to push and eventually she agreed that they could try cyber-charter to see if he would have more success than he was having at his home school. They had friends who

were cyber-charter students and at their recommendation, they enrolled in Lincoln Cyber Charter School. Shane attended Lincoln Cyber Charter School for the first six months of his tenth grade year.

During those six months, Shane struggled to complete his assignments. He found the online environment did not match his learning style. He was a hands-on learner and had difficulty gaining value from teacher lectures. As a student with special needs, he was offered no accommodations and felt that he was expected to learn on his own. When he requested help from his online teachers, he felt that they ignored him; without any teacher support, he eventually gave up and stopped logging on at all. When his mother realized how hard cyber-charter school was on her son, she enlisted the help of his sister and her friend who had children enrolled in the same school. Together, they provided enough help to allow Shane to pass the six classes for which he had enrolled.

Shane then got in trouble with the law and was sent away for the remainder of the school year. He was forced to quit Lincoln Cyber Charter School and was educated by the state for the next six months. Upon his release, he re-enrolled in his home school and was able to graduate from there with his age appropriate peers.

Jacob was a former foster child who lost his parents and was on his own. He dropped out of his home school because of the anxiety he experienced from being in a regular school with so many other people. At the age of 18, he became involved in an Independent Living program run by a local social services agency. This program provided group housing for young adults over 18, but attached stipulations: A participant had to either find gainful employment, become a full-time student, or volunteer time to a local charity to remain living in the house and involved with the program. Jacob chose to

return to school and enrolled in Kennedy Cyber Charter School. He thought Kennedy was a school that would not produce the anxiety he had felt in public school. His Case Manager at the Independent Living program, who had no part in Jacob's decision to enroll in cyber-charter school, became his learning coach. Jacob loved cyber-school. He felt it was the perfect answer to the difficulties he had experienced in public school. He enrolled in six classes. Another stipulation of the Independent Living program was that residents had to be out of the house during the day to ensure they were pursuing either work, school, or volunteer work. Jacob would go to the local library where he could access their Internet connection and do his Kennedy school work.

His learning coach, Susan, would come to the house in the morning to wake him up and make sure he left on time. She would drop by the library from time to time to check on him to make sure he was on task. She also helped him to understand how to navigate through the Kennedy website so he could access help from his teachers. She would also come to the house some evenings to help Jacob if he was having difficulty understanding any concepts. Jacob was very satisfied with the help he received from Kennedy, as well as his learning coach, Susan. Jacob was enrolled in Kennedy for six months. During those six months, Jacob made no progress in cyber-charter school. More often than not, when Susan went to the library, Jacob was watching movies on Netflix rather than doing his school work. He was given several warnings that he needed to be making progress in school to remain in the program, but eventually he was terminated and asked to leave the house.

Jacob dropped out of school for a second time. He is not bitter and still believes that his learning coach and his teachers at Kennedy did everything they could for him. He

takes full responsibility for his failure. He has not returned to school in the ensuing three years although he hopes to pursue a high school equivalency program soon.

Eve, her mom, and her sister moved to a new town at the beginning of her junior year. When she started in her new school, she was being picked on because she was the “new” kid. By November of that year, she had had enough of the bullying, and she and her mom decided to enroll in Lincoln Cyber Charter School. At the time she enrolled, Eve’s mother was not working so she was there every morning to ensure that Eve got up at a reasonable time and logged on to do her school work. A month after enrolling her daughter, Eve’s mother got a job that required her to leave the house at 4:00 A.M. every morning.

That first month everything went well and Eve and her mother were both happy with the progress she was making. Once Eve’s mother got the job, however, things began to change. Without her mom to wake her up and make her start school, Eve began to sleep in every day. Her mom would come home from work at noon and find her daughter still asleep. Eve’s new sleeping habits caused great tension in the house, and they fought constantly. Eve continued to work online, but her hours changed, and she would have to stay up late at night to complete her work.

Because she entered Lincoln Cyber Charter School in November, some of her teachers required her to complete the work she had missed from September until she enrolled, and some did not. She was able to get help from her teachers, from her mother and her boyfriend at home, and she could also call her sister in college to get help. However, Eve started to become depressed. Even though the kids at public school were mean to her, she missed the daily interaction she had with people at school. She spent

most days alone in her apartment, and the loneliness began to take a toll. Sleeping all day and working at night, her grades began to slip. Eve managed to barely pass all of the classes she took that year. She decided for her senior year it would be better for her to leave cyber-charter school and return to her home school. Her mother was very relieved with her decision.

Enrolled in her home school, Eve did very well. She believes that cyber-charter school gave her confidence in herself that she lacked prior to enrolling. Lincoln Cyber Charter School did all they could do to meet her needs, but she needed the social contact she could only receive at a brick-and-mortar school. She eventually graduated from her home school.

Misty first enrolled in her home school's cyber program in the middle of her eighth-grade year. She left traditional school because of bullying issues that she and her parents felt were being ignored by the school's administration. She flourished in that program for the next two years. She left her home school cyber program and enrolled in Kennedy Cyber Charter School at the beginning of her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. Her church had several school-age members who already attended Kennedy, and the church board decided to set up a school in their basement where members could attend school via Kennedy and also be involved in religious education provided by the pastor and volunteer parishioners. Misty's parents felt this would be a better option for their daughter and enrolled her.

The school opened with twelve students. The church board asked one of its members, Amy, who had always home-schooled her own children, to take charge of the group and to act as learning coach for all twelve students. The program operated like a

public school inasmuch as students were expected to arrive at a certain time and stay until a certain time. They had one hour of religious instruction and then they logged on to Kennedy Cyber Charter School and began their day. Misty did well in her classes at Kennedy. She got along well with her learning coach and also received instruction from other volunteers who would stop in to help. Misty also remained involved in athletics and clubs at her home school, so she was able to maintain friendships she had made before she left. She liked the program at Kennedy at first, but as time went on, her attitude began to change. Misty felt that her teachers at Kennedy were not helpful. She had difficulty contacting them and getting a response.

Her online classes were chaotic because there were so many students in each class that needed help. Her teachers did not grade her work in a timely manner and her grades began to drop. By the end of the year, she was ready to leave Kennedy Cyber Charter School and return to her home school at the beginning of the next school year. The next fall she returned to her home school's cyber program. It was similar to Kennedy's program, but students were required to come into school once a week for several hours to meet with the teacher, review progress, and get answers to their questions. She liked this program much better. She spent two years in her school's cyber program and graduated from her home school.

Tommy left his home school after his ninth-grade year. Tommy had Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and was having tremendous difficulty focusing on his school work. His inattention and his inability to stay on task began getting him into trouble on a regular basis. His parents finally determined that a traditional classroom setting was not working for their son. They tried a partial hospitalization program

recommended by a psychologist, but that was not successful. His parents saw a television advertisement for Washington Cyber Charter School and decided to enroll him. Tommy felt like he really did not fit in with the other students at his home school and welcomed the opportunity to stay home and do school work.

He felt that he was much more successful when he could work without the distractions that were so prevalent in public school. He did well at Washington Cyber Charter School. He passed all his classes. The lowest grade he received was a D in Algebra. The setting allowed him to work ahead and make up some of the coursework he had not completed when he was in public school. His dad, Fred, acted as his learning coach. Fred divided Tommy's work into smaller sections and developed a schedule. He would check at the end of each day to ensure Tommy had done the work. Tommy procrastinated, but his father kept on him, allowing him make progress in cyber charter school.

When Tommy turned 18, he moved out of his parents' house. He took his Washington Cyber Charter School equipment with him, but never logged in again. Spending time with students he met while in the partial program, he began to get in trouble. He stopped taking his medication, and his judgment suffered. He ended up getting arrested and spending two months in jail. Upon his release, he moved back into his parents' house.

Properly medicated, Tommy was enrolled in his home school's cyber program. He began to flourish. He liked the one-on-one attention he received when he went into school once a week to meet with the teacher. His parents were very happy with the

school's program and his success. Tommy finished all his work and graduated from his home school.

### **Learning Coaches' Stories**

Krystal has five children. Her second oldest, Shane, was identified as a student with special needs. He struggled in school and was making bad decisions that were getting him in trouble. As a result, he began to resist going to school. When Shane requested that he be allowed to transfer to a cyber-charter school, Krystal was initially against it. Her major concern was that he would have difficulty working on his own. She was also concerned that he would miss some of the social opportunities that made the high school years so special. However, Shane kept up his arguments, and eventually she began looking into cyber-charter schools. A family friend whom she trusted had enrolled her children in Lincoln Cyber Charter School and recommended it to Krystal. She contacted Lincoln and spoke with a representative who assured her that her son could easily get the one-on-one help she believed he needed. Shane was enrolled in cyber-charter school.

Krystal immediately noticed problems. Shane was experiencing technical difficulties logging on and staying connected to his cyber-charter school. He began to struggle with his assignments and was not able to access the help he had been promised. He began to become frustrated and getting him to complete his assignments became more difficult. Eventually, Shane gave up and refused to log on. Krystal then enlisted the help of her trusted friend and her older daughter to work with Shane and give him the one-on-one help that he needed. With their help, he was able to get caught up with his missing work and pass all of his classes during his first semester.

There was no second semester. Shane got into legal trouble and was incarcerated for several months. When he was released, the judge mandated that he return to his home school and attend regularly as a condition of his parole. Because of his earlier disciplinary issues, he was placed in an alternative education setting, where he did his work and passed his classes. He ended up graduating from his home school. Krystal believes that Lincoln Cyber Charter School did not meet the needs of her son.

Susan was an employee of Children & Youth, a social services agency. Her job was to work with the population of their Independent Living program facility. Independent Living is a Children & Youth sponsored transition program for foster children to help them begin adult life after they leave the foster system (Family Care, 2018). One of her clients was Jacob. Jacob dropped out of high school because he believed he suffered from agoraphobia, which was never diagnosed. At one point, prior to his involvement with Independent Living, he began the process of enrolling in Washington Cyber Charter School but never attended. He chose Kennedy Cyber Charter School because he felt it could provide him with a new start. As part of the Independent Living program, residents had to get up in the morning and leave the house by a certain time.

In the six months that Susan worked with Jacob, he got up on his own twice. She was constantly fighting with him to get out of bed and get going. Once Jacob left the house, he went to the library to do his school work. Susan would do periodic spot checks on Jacob, and she had access to his Kennedy dashboard so she could see the progress he was making. Unfortunately, Jacob was making very little progress. When Susan taught Jacob in a one-on-one setting, he was capable of doing the work. However, he never

followed up on his promises to complete his assignments. Even after several warnings, Jacob refused to put forth any more effort than he currently was attempting, and he was dropped from the program. Jacob had to move out of the facility. He completed none of the classes for which he enrolled.

Mary enrolled her daughter, Eve, in Lincoln Cyber Charter School after she was bullied in her new high school. Since her older daughter was away at college, she felt her younger daughter could handle the rigor of cyber-charter school. When Eve enrolled, Mary was unemployed and was at home to ensure her daughter got up, logged on, and completed her assignments. A month later Mary was hired for a job that required her to leave the house at 4:00 A.M. every morning. Once Mary was not there to wake her up, Eve slept until noon daily. Once awake, however, Eve worked diligently on her academic assignments. Mary and her boyfriend helped Eve when they could, and Eve received phone help from her older sister. Eve would spend six to eight hours a day online working on her assignments. She was making progress, but it came at a cost. Her daughter would sleep until noon and then get up and spend the next several hours doing school work. Being in a new town, Eve had no friends. As a result, she had very few socialization opportunities, and she began to become lonely. Eve became depressed, and allowed her school work to suffer. As her coach, Mary helped as much as she could, but saw the need for a change. When Eve told her mother that she wanted to go back to her home school, it was a relief for Mary. Looking back on the experience, she wished she made her daughter deal with the issues she was encountering at her new school rather than retreating into cyber-charter school.

Amy and her family moved around quite a bit due to her husband's job. At first, she home-schooled her children until she heard about Kennedy Cyber Charter School, which would provide her with the computer and the curriculum for free. Having struggled for years devising her own curriculum, this resource seemed perfect. She enrolled her own children in cyber-charter school, and they did well.

Amy is a devout woman, and she shared her stories about cyber-charter school with other people in her church. There were two other families in her church who were already attending Kennedy. These discussions led to the pastor and the church board deciding to open a free school in their basement which would offer religious instruction for an hour and then facilitate students' work in Kennedy Cyber Charter School for the remainder of the day. Church volunteers provided the religious instruction and the local school district paid the cost of the Kennedy tuitions. They announced this option in church and had twelve students sign up for the program, including Amy's children. Amy, with her home-school background, was asked to serve as learning coach for these twelve students. Amy agreed and became responsible for monitoring each of the twelve students' progress and scheduling church volunteers who would come in to help the children. She said the time period was hectic, but praised the teachers at Kennedy who provided help whenever she needed it. During the spring of that year, the local school district superintendent paid a visit to the church to express his concern about the program they were operating. He explained to Amy that the district was paying Kennedy for all of her students, and this expense was creating a hardship within the district.

This news was a revelation to Amy. She did not know that the money to pay Kennedy came from local taxpayers. She thought the state funded it. She was shocked

and appalled. If she had known that her neighbors were paying for Kennedy, she would have developed her own curriculum, which would have been free. As a result of this knowledge, she resigned her job as learning coach, and the church decided to discontinue the program.

Fred's son suffered from ADHD and as a result, he struggled in regular school. He went out of his way to make friends and was willing to do almost anything his friends would ask. That willingness led to some students taking advantage of his son who chose behaviors regardless of their consequences.

This behavior led to discipline issues in school. At the suggestion of their psychologist, Fred enrolled his son in a partial hospitalization program which placed him in contact with students who had severe discipline issues in school. Fred believes that this group of friends only exacerbated the problem and put his son behind in his studies. He removed Tommy and enrolled him in Washington Charter School. Fred thought that if he kept his son out of the public school, he could have more success because he would be able to focus on his work without the distractions he faced in a regular classroom.

Fred set up a very structured program. He sub-divided the assignments for each course into smaller segments making the assignments less overwhelming and more manageable. Fred pushed Tommy to complete his work. This pressure created tension between father and son and led to arguments. Fred would not take no for an answer, and eventually, Tommy began to respond. He began to do well in cyber charter school. He occasionally struggled, but his dad was there to help him whenever he needed it.

Everything seemed to be going well until Tommy's eighteenth birthday. Tommy announced he was moving out of his dad's home. He took his computer and instructional

materials with him, but he did no more school work. Fred was able to get the Washington Cyber Charter School's equipment back and return it, but he could not compel Tommy to return to school.

His son began hanging out with the kids he met in the partial program and stopped taking his medication. Three months later Tommy was arrested and sentenced to several months in jail. Upon his release, he moved back into his parents' house. They were able to get him back on his medication, and enrolled him in his home school's cyber program. This program allowed Tommy to continue working at home, but required him to come into school once a week to meet with the teacher.

Fred credits this program with turning his son's academic career around. His son liked meeting with the teacher and he again began to flourish. He was able to make up the work he had missed during his absence from school and was able to graduate from his home school. Fred's only regret, aside from the partial program, was he did not enroll Tommy in this program from the beginning.

The next section probes deeper into the stories of the students involved in the study. In this section the first research question was broken down into separate sub-questions that together comprise the whole. Each of these sub-sections was labeled. Student responses to each sub-question are discussed and analyzed.

### **Research Question 1**

What are the Perceptions of Former Students Who Chose to Leave Their Brick-and-Mortar School to Attend a For-Profit Cyber-Charter School in Pennsylvania in Terms of Their Achievement and the Support They Received From Their Cyber-Charter Schools and in Their Home?

Research Question 1 will be divided into three sections: Student perceptions of support in the home, student perceptions of support from school, and student perceptions of achievement.

### **Student Perceptions of Support in the Home**

Enrolling in cyber-charter school required some changes in both the students' and their learning coaches' lives. Instead of getting up and going to school, the students worked on a computer either at home or in one case, at the local library. Instead of dealing with a teacher in the front of the room, students relied on their cyber-charter teachers online. Instead of having a teacher right there with them to keep them on task and answer any questions they may have had, they relied on their learning coaches. Part of the first research question posed by the study examined student perceptions of the support they received in their home. All five student participants believed they received adequate support in their home.

Tommy struggled in his home school. He suffered from ADHD and had trouble with concentration in a regular classroom. When his father suggested cyber-charter school, Tommy was open to trying it. He explained, "My dad thought it would be a good idea, you know, and he asked me and he talked to me about it at first, and I was like, you know what? Sure. We'll give it a shot." Tommy realized himself that public school was not meeting his needs:

I left mainly for a couple of reasons. For one, I didn't really, I didn't really fit in. I was one of the weird kids and stuff like that. Plus, having ADHD and stuff like I had. At the time I wasn't on the right medication and it was hard for me to, you know, focus on things, and there was always kids trying to distract me or make

faces or whatever and I literally I would learn like nothing. And then I would fail a test or something and you know, my dad brought this to my attention and said well, would you want to try this? And I said you know I'll give it a go and so it goes and it just went from there really."

Together, Tommy and his father began the search for a cyber-charter school. They looked at several choices. As Tommy recalled, "There were a couple. I know Kennedy was one and a couple of others that didn't seem...I don't know, it was just, for some reason Washington Cyber Charter School stuck out at me. I can't really explain that." Tommy's dad, Fred, acted as his learning coach. When Tommy first got started there were some conflicts between him and his dad, but Tommy felt like his dad was working in his best interest. He described the supervision his dad provided:

I mean there would usually be, he would ask me if he was at work or if he would get home he would ask me If I did my work, which the majority of time yes I did of course but there was occasional times there was oh, did you remember to do that, you know thing in math you had to do and like I'd be like "Oh, I forgot," and I'd get on and do it. He was also there to help me a lot with you know whenever I had questions rather than having to call somebody or whatever, he was there to really help me understand it if I had any questions.

When asked if there were any arguments that took place over his work habits, Tommy admitted:

Occasionally, yeah. I'll be completely honest, there were times where you know sometimes neither one of us would be wrong. There would be a certain method he would use to figure out a problem and I'd be like O.K., that's not what I was

taught or that's not what I know. Sometimes we had conflict but it was always resolved and as long as you get the same answer, really whatever is easiest for you to do, you know? So, minor stuff like that.

Fred was very involved with all aspects of Tommy's online experience. He acted as a true learning coach. Tommy described how his dad would help him when he struggled:

He told me, "I'm here if you have any questions," so like I would be doing my homework or something like that or even if I was in the classroom itself while the teacher was talking, sometimes I'd call him over and I'd have him look at it and if the teacher wasn't really explaining it in a way that made sense, I would say, "What does that mean?" or "What is this?" and he would explain it to me more and he'd sit down and sometimes he would actually, after the class was over make me worksheets to practice on.

When Tommy neglected to log on and do his assigned work, his father would talk to him about the need to complete his work. Tommy recounted:

Growing being a young kid, there was other stuff I wanted to do at times. He would always sit me down and if I would fall behind, or if I didn't spend enough time, he would let me know, he would help me to realize that the more I spent on it, not only the more it would benefit me, but the less in the long run that I would have to put forth effort in the future and it would actually benefit me in the long run, and so he would do that.

Tommy felt as if he was completely supported at home while he was in the online environment.

Another student, Jacob was not a traditional high school student. Having lost both his parents at an early age, he found himself homeless. He began the process of enrolling at Lincoln Cyber Charter School but never followed through to the point of beginning classes. He eventually dropped out of high school. He explained:

I have a lot of anxiety and public schools... I did try to go back to my home school after I was put out of foster care, I did try to enroll in that. I went for half a day and I have so much anxiety, I just couldn't do it so I decided that maybe learning online would be better and I learn a lot better when I hear and can see things so it was better to just look at the screen and hear the teacher talking rather than be surrounded by a group of students.

Jacob described the difficulties he faced after leaving his home school:

I was homeless after that and I just could not afford to keep going. I did not have a laptop. I mean I did, but I did not have Wifi to get on it... and my personal life just got in the way.

Jacob was referred to the Independent Living Program, which was a transition program run by a local social service agency. The program provided Jacob a room in transition housing, but there were several strings attached. One was that Jacob had to either go to work or go back to school. Jacob chose to return to school. He opted for cyber-charter school because of anxiety issues he had suffered through when he was enrolled in public school. He enrolled in Kennedy Cyber Charter School. He chose Kennedy he said because:

I did look through a lot of different schools and I just figured that that one looked like the best, the most stable for me. They gave you all the supplies you needed to

study. They gave you a laptop, of course, to get on. They just had a great system that enabled me to do my best.

Once he moved into the Independent Living house, he was required to answer to the staff that monitored all of the residents. Jacob's caseworker was Susan, and she took up the role of Jacob's learning coach. As part of the house rules, Jacob was required to leave the house during the day to pursue his education. Jacob chose to go to his local library to do his school work. There was a Wifi connection there and he was welcomed and allowed to stay as long as he needed. The problems began almost immediately. Jacob was not good at getting up in the morning which resulted in conflict. He explained, "They would get on me about getting up in the morning because I did have a thing with that. They just pushed me to actually do it and to be a better person in general." Susan was the staff member tasked with getting Jacob up and out the door each morning. Her task was not an easy one. As Jacob recounted, "I wasn't very happy. I was not a very happy person when I was pushed, but in the long run I'm very thankful that they were there." As his stay at the facility continued, Jacob learned to appreciate his learning coach. When asked how Susan helped her, Jacob responded:

She helped me. First of all, she was kind of like a counselor sometimes because sometimes I would break down and she would be there. She taught me how to be more of an adult, fill out job applications, how to make a budget plan. That was big for me. I really needed to learn how to do that. Basically any life skills I needed in life, she was there to teach me.

When Jacob needed help with his coursework, he was more likely to go to Susan than to try and get help from his teachers at Kennedy. When asked what that looked like, Jacob

responded: “Susan did the best she could. She researched things and helped me find what I needed to find. Anytime I had any questions with the courses, I would go to her.”

Overall, Jacob was very happy and thankful for the support he received from his learning coach. As he explained: “If I needed to ask somebody for help, my learning coach was right there with me.”

Moving to a new school can cause extra challenges. Eve moved to a new school and was picked on as the “new” kid. Both she and her mother felt that she was not supported by the teachers and administration in her new school, and they decided that cyber-charter would be a better option. As Eve explained it, “Me and my mom had an idea that it would probably be better for me, and I would do better in cyber school than I did in regular school at the time.” They chose Lincoln Cyber Charter School. When asked why she picked Lincoln, Eve responded:

I knew about Kennedy, and I knew friends from before I had lived here, I was from another area. I had friends up there who went to Kennedy and things like that and they said it was easier on them so I asked my mom about doing cyber school and she found Lincoln Cyber Charter School and thought that was the best choice for me.

When asked if she had any input on the decision, Eve replied, “My mom did all her research on it and picked Lincoln. I was just kind of got strung along for the ride.” In the beginning of her time in cyber-charter school, things went well. Her mother was not working then and was able to make sure Eve was up at a reasonable hour and logged on to do her school work. That changed when Eve’s mother got a job that required her to be out of the house each morning at 4:00 A.M. Without someone to wake her, Eve began to

sleep until noon. This conflict led to problems between Eve and her mother. As Eve explained it, “There were a lot of issues with that. I would not wake up until about noon every day and she would always yell at me that I had to be up earlier to do my work and everything else.” The pattern continued to repeat itself. Eve knew that:

My mom was really tired of telling me to get up every day and do my work and things like that. She was basically my motivator in the whole process and she was just tired of repeating herself all the time.

When Eve did get up, she was diligent about logging on and getting her work done.

When her mother returned from work and Eve would log on, they approached much of the work together. Eve described her home environment:

We used to have a projector and a screen so we used to project my school work on the screen in like our dining room or something like that and we would literally sit there and figure out my chemistry and my math altogether basically and it was always interesting. There wasn't anything about it that...it was always interesting.

Sometimes, Eve's mother would enlist help. When asked if she received help from anyone besides her mother, Eve responded, “It was sometimes her boyfriend if her boyfriend was home. He was just very helpful. He was my chemistry... because he was big into chemistry whenever he was younger.” While Eve and her mother worked together, their time was not without conflict. Eve explained:

Me and her would sit down for hours and try and figure stuff out and either I'd be wrong or she'd be wrong or we would do it one way and it had to be done a different way, and we just argued a lot about it.

Eve's mother worked hard as her daughter's learning coach. Even though they fought, Eve felt that her mother's help was critical to her success in cyber-charter school.

Bullying issues caused Misty to leave her traditional school. Her mother suggested cyber-charter school as an alternative. They discussed it as a family, and Misty described her dad's reluctance:

I mean my dad was a little uneasy about it because he wanted me to go and make friends and do activities, but I was still involved in everything at my home school so he was O.K. after he learned that I was allowed to do other things at the school too.

They decided to enroll Misty in her home school's cyber program. She spent two years in that program and loved it. She described her school's online program: "I started cyber school in the middle of 8th grade, I think and it just went on from there. I mean I loved it. I was still involved in like volleyball, softball, some clubs after school." Misty was making good progress in her home school's cyber program. Two years later, the topic of cyber-charter school was becoming a popular issue at her church. Several church members had students who were enrolled in Kennedy Cyber Charter School, and one of them, Amy, had been home-schooling her children since they were old enough for school.

The church board decided to begin a program in the church basement that would combine religious studies with cyber-charter school. The Board decided that Kennedy would be the provider of the curriculum, and Amy volunteered to serve as the learning coach for any students who wanted to take part. Misty's parents were intrigued. They did some research on Kennedy and felt it should meet their needs. Misty described their

research: “I heard lots of good things about it from other people. I mean a couple of people from my church went to Kennedy and they are doing really well. They were taking college classes.” Misty described the advent of the program:

A lot of people at my church were doing it so the one person at my church said that we should just start something at church and it was... we had an hour a day like learning about God then the rest was my learning coach, Amy, helping us with whatever we needed with math and English. I mean we had kids there from 5th grade to 12th so it was very flexible for her.

Misty joined a group of twelve students who were enrolled in Kennedy and were doing their online work in the basement of their church. Misty was the oldest of the students and benefited from the help that church volunteers offered. Amy was designated the learning coach. Misty described the help she received from Amy:

She was very helpful. She helped as much as she could. She had a couple of people from the church who would come and help too. Like we had a cooking class at the learning center. There were like people who specialized in math, and science and they would come in and help.

Several retired church members would come in from time to time to help. Misty went on to describe the volunteers:

They could help me as much as they could. There was this one guy whose name was Joe. He was a math person that would help us. He helped us as much as he could. We had daily lessons whenever he could attend helping us, but we had kids in 6th grade in that lesson also so I mean it wasn't really a help to me. I mean, I helped the kids more than I helped myself in that math lesson. My Pap is also like

a math genius, so he would help me too. I helped as much as I could around the learning center because I was the oldest one there.

Misty felt that Amy was a big help. She described the support provided by Amy, “Yeah, she really helped us to do stuff. I mean she knew everyone’s time to login. If we were goofing around, she’d be like hey, log in right now. So she was very helpful with that.”

Misty did not initially request help from her cyber teachers because she felt she had enough support from her church family. As she explained it:

If I needed help, I wouldn’t go to Kennedy first, I would go to my learning coach, and then if my learning coach couldn’t help me, I would go to people around me like Joe or people around my church and then since I knew it would take so long after all that, I would try to call.

Misty felt she received quality support from Amy and the volunteers from her church that were willing to help.

When Shane enrolled in Lincoln Cyber Charter School, he hoped that cyber-charter school would be easier for him than his home school. He also wanted to end his relationship with the principal who acted as a disciplinarian in the behavior issues that Shane was having. Shane explained, “I thought about trying it cause I didn’t have to go to school, but I was at home. I thought it would have been easier and everything, but it wasn’t.” When she allowed Shane to leave his home school, his mother, Krystal, planned on acting as Shane’s learning coach. However, it soon became apparent that Krystal was not going to be much help to Shane. Shane explained that:

She helped get me set up through all that and everything, but when I went to do my own work, it was just... I had to do the best I can to figure it out. A lot of the stuff I didn't even know.

Shane also had to contend with his four siblings as he tried to work in their home, which made it difficult to concentrate. As he began to struggle, Shane became frustrated, which led to him logging on less and less. He stated:

Like some of the work I did I had already learned at public school, but then it started moving on and I didn't know what it was. It became harder and harder because they didn't want to do a problem just to show you how it worked right. I had nothing to go by. I would sit there a half hour on one question. I wouldn't know what to do.

Eventually, Shane stopped logging on at all, and he dropped further and further behind. Instead of allowing Shane to drop out, Krystal enlisted the help of Shane's older sister, who had already graduated high school to help her brother. Shane explained:

I got help from my sister a couple of times and showed her the work and she taught me how to do the problem. She wouldn't do them for me, but she showed me how to do the problems, and she helped me out a couple of times.

With this help, Shane said he was able to catch up in all of his classes. He described his frustration prior to his sister's assistance: "I ended up getting all of them done, but I got so far behind for a while I just stopped doing my work. I mean it was pointless because I didn't have nobody that could help me." Without his sister to help him, Shane would have failed his classes.

## **Student Perceptions of Support From School**

These five students who attended cyber-charter school counted on their learning coaches to help them when they didn't understand their lessons. However, their learning coaches were not always available and in some cases did not have the ability to help. When help from home was not available, students had to count on their cyber teachers for the needed help. Three of the five students in the study believed they received adequate support from their cyber-charter school teachers.

Eve was satisfied with the support she received from her teachers at Lincoln Cyber Charter School. When she encountered a problem that she and her mother together could not solve, she did not hesitate to reach out to her cyber teachers. She explained, "We could always private message the teacher and ask them for help and things like that so most of the time that's what I did." Eve also described how she was able to receive immediate one-on-one help from her teachers: "They would... I know my geometry teacher would go and actually have a private live session and she would explain how the process was to do a question or something like that." Eve appreciated this help because it allowed her continue to move forward with her classwork. When the explanation took more time than the teacher could afford during her scheduled class, Eve was able to set up a separate time outside of class when she could get the same one-on-one help. She explained, "If I had a problem or something like that, if she didn't have a live class that day for everybody, she would tell me like O.K., well we can do this this day, and that's what we did." She also appreciated the care shown by her teachers. She recounted "I mean like every day they would message me and things like that to make sure I was

doing O.K. and checking on me.” Eve believed that the assistance she received from her teachers at Lincoln helped her to be successful in cyber-charter school.

Jacob was also thankful for the help he received from his cyber-charter teachers at Kennedy Cyber Charter School. He was surprised by the level of support they offered:

I didn’t expect all of the people to support me. They had an incredible support system like what I said with my math teacher, and if she wasn’t available then one of my other teachers was all available. All of my teachers, they give you their e-mail to contact them. I think that was the...I did not expect that at all. I expected just to go on, have homework forwarded to me and that was it. It was a lot easier; they made it more comfortable.

When asked to explain how he accessed that help, Jacob responded:

I’m going to my e-mail. Actually they have a list on the site of all my teachers and they have their e-mails beside them. I would go through that list, try to find the one for that subject and go to my e-mail and e-mail them and say, *hey look I need some help with this project and so and so. Is there any way you can help me out?* Then they would send a message back explaining the different parts of help I needed and they would make it a lot clearer for me.

Jacob felt as if some teachers were more helpful than others:

Most of them were good. There was a few who would be just like refer back to this lesson. Go back into your dashboard and refer back to this and watch this video and then the others would explain it flat out for me. That way was easy for me.

Jacob was not the most diligent student. Often he would wait until the last minute to complete his assignments and would find himself stuck late at night without immediate access to his teachers. That was problematic for Jacob. He explained:

It's harder if you are stuck, like I remember doing homework at like 10:00 at night and by that time everybody's in bed, and when school hours are over, school hours are over so I couldn't ask anybody questions. I would have to wait for the morning and some parts of my homework wouldn't be done because I just couldn't understand it. So that would be, I mean, just not having a teacher onsite right away when I needed them was difficult.

However, he was thankful for the concern shown for him by his math teacher:

My math teacher was a big person in my life who helped me there. She would e-mail me sometimes just to check up and see how I was doing, but when I did need help, I think maybe two out of three of my teachers were writing back right away within a couple of hours. I did not message anyone after 10:00 P.M. because I just felt that was rude and I did not want to keep them up, but yeah, they did a pretty good job of getting back to me. I never had an issue with a teacher not getting back to me.

Although Jacob was not successful at Kennedy Cyber Charter School, he did not blame the school or his cyber teachers for his failure.

One student praised his teachers for their help. Tommy loved Washington Cyber Charter School. He had nothing but praise for the help he received from his teachers:

I think about how hands-on the teachers actually were. They would actually sometimes bring just you by yourself into a private room to talk to you and help

you out if you didn't understand something and it made me feel more like I mattered. Do you know what I mean? It made me feel like O.K., they actually cared about what I'm asking and stuff like that.

He described a typical help session:

There would be times when you'd come in and they were already helping somebody. Like you would listen to what the other kid was saying or whatever and sometimes the kid would have a bunch of questions and you might have to wait for a little while, but for the most part, that only happened maybe three or four times with me. For the most part I would go in and sometimes I'd be the only student in there, so they'd say, "Hey, what do you need help with?" and I'd get it right off the bat. It was usually really pretty quick and painless.

While Tommy enjoyed a lot of support from his father, who acted as his learning coach, he also counted on help from his cyber teachers:

Well, they had the open tutoring sessions so occasionally if I really, really couldn't get something or my dad was away or something like that, I would go into those and what's great about those is that you could be in there for as long as you needed until you actually understood it and then you could just log off whenever and whenever you understood it then, that was it.

Tommy also described some of the guidance functions available to him at Washington Cyber Charter School:

Usually at the end of every marking period, they would call and say, "O.K., do you have any questions?" or anything like that and sometimes I even got phone

calls from teachers just to tell me I either did a really good job with something or they were impressed with me or things like that.

Tommy felt as if the support he received from his cyber-charter teachers showed him that they cared about him and did not just see him as another number. He felt that the support he received at Washington Cyber Charter School helped him to be successful.

Misty's experiences in Kennedy Cyber Charter School were not positive. She struggled without having a live person to teach her. She explained the difference between her home school and her cyber-charter school: "At Kennedy you just have a teacher talking to you. You can't actually... you can talk to them, but it's like over the phone. You can't actually see them face-to-face." This was a change that Misty had trouble adjusting to: "It wasn't really helpful to me. Like I couldn't see a teacher or be with the teacher. I was online basically just listening to a teacher. There wasn't really any one-on-one help." She also experienced technical difficulties that made her time online more stressful:

They had a lot of problems with their technology that you would have to... like it would take forever to log into your classes. They could fix that. It just took forever to log in to one class. Sometimes I was 30 minutes late to a class.

Misty felt as if her struggles were not being taken seriously by her teachers because they had so many students in each class: "I mean in my one class we probably had like 150 students in it, and it was just crazy." Having that many students in a class meant that individual help was hard to receive. When asked what getting help looked like for her, Misty responded:

It was nuts. (laughs) Just because you had so many kids asking for help, asking how to do this, asking how to do that. They had a chat thing where you could ask teachers questions, and it was just very hard to focus on because everyone would goof off like in the chat talking about stuff that was not even meant to be there.

If Misty needed help when she was not in class, she found that difficult to access as well:

You would have to call an 800 number, and you could e-mail your teacher, but they really didn't get back to you on time. There's a help site that you can go on that there would be certain people whether it would be students or a couple of other teachers that would be able to help you if that teacher wasn't able to. It was a very long process to try and get ahold of someone.

She continued:

They would get back to you every couple of days. I mean if you were in a class and be like "hey, did you get my message?" They would call and like I don't know if they didn't see it or they'd ignore you or what, but it was very hard.

Misty also described her concerns about the timeliness of her teachers posting her grades when she had completed assignments: "In my English class, my one teacher never put anything in. So say you got a bad grade in something, your grade would drop really low until she would put everything in. I mean I was constantly fretting about my grade."

Misty felt she did not receive an adequate level of support from Kennedy Cyber Charter School.

Shane struggled at Lincoln Cyber Charter School from the very beginning. As a student with special needs, he was placed in a regular classroom with no

accommodations. When he began having difficulty completing his assignments, he found it difficult to access help from his teachers. He explained:

You could message your teacher or call her. I only had the teacher answer me one time out of I couldn't tell you how many times. You could leave messages and messages and no one would ever get back to you. To me it sort of felt like that's their job and they really don't have to do anything because they can get away with it. That's what they always did.

Shane also struggled without the benefit of a live teacher. He described how new information was presented to him: "Like sometimes they put videos up for you to watch and if you had a problem with a question you really couldn't get any help with it." He also had difficulty following the rules of the school. Shane described one situation where he ran into trouble, "At Lincoln with the laptop they gave you like if you googled and looked up a question, they would detect that and they would say you are cheating and fail you." Shane began to fall behind in his classes and started to become frustrated. He described his frustrations:

There's really no help. If you have a question, you just can't talk to a teacher. I'm a hands-on learner and it really did not help me to have nobody help me with questions and then show me how to do the work. For me that really made it difficult and that's why I didn't last in cyber school. Made it a little while, and then I just quit doing my school work. I couldn't do it. I just didn't know what I was doing.

Eventually, Shane completely shut down his efforts and was heading toward quitting school. He explained, "That's why I quit doing the work. They can't even help me so my

thought was why should I even do it if I can't do it and no one will help me?" Only after his older sister intervened and began giving Shane the one-on-one help he required did he begin to regain his interest in learning. Shane felt that he received no support from Lincoln Cyber Charter School.

### **Student Perceptions of Achievement**

Achievement in this study was measured in terms of receiving passing grades and completing courses in cyber-charter school. Graduation was not considered a factor in achievement because none of the five students involved in the study graduated from their cyber-charter schools. Rather, success was determined by how the individual students perceived their progress as they worked through their courses. Three of the five students believed they achieved success in cyber-charter school.

Tommy felt that he was successful during his time in Washington Cyber Charter School. He felt that cyber charter met his needs particularly well. He explained:

Like I said, there were far less distractions and another thing I didn't mention too is they had kind of a schedule like a guideline of when you should do this or whatever like days and stuff that it was really ultimately up to me, so I was able to work it in and work around that, so it wasn't like I was you know always dull all the time, always at school doing whatever, and it was just I think a lot easier to find the time to be able to focus and do it without distractions.

With the support of his learning coach and his cyber teachers, Tommy was making progress that he was unable to achieve at his home school. The online environment worked for him. When pressed to explain why the online environment was better, Tommy tried to explain:

I don't know. I didn't miss, of course, the other students. I didn't miss the judgment. I didn't miss the peer pressure. A lot of the teachers really didn't really understand things or whatever. I really didn't care for it and I just know that a lot of time being younger, I really didn't want to be at school. I wanted to be home because I didn't like being there, so being home was a better option.

Asked what he felt would have happened if he had stayed in public school, Tommy replied:

I think if I would have stayed in public school, I would have, knowing the type of person I was whenever I was a teenager, I'm not going to lie, there were some rough spots, I think if I would have just stayed in public school, I wouldn't have gotten what I needed. I would have either dropped out or I would have graduated by the skin of my teeth, know what I mean? So, I think the home schooling thing was the better choice.

Tommy was successful when he had the support from his learning coach as well as his teachers. However, when Tommy left his home and went off his medication, he quit school altogether in spite of the success he was having. It was only when he was forced to move back home and enrolled in his home school's cyber school that he was able to continue the work and finally graduate. The support made all the difference to Tommy.

Eve believes she was successful during her time in Lincoln Cyber Charter School. When asked if she felt she was successful in cyber-charter school, she answered, "Yes, I was successful. I completed all my classes, and I passed all of them." When pressed about her grades, Eve admitted, "I actually don't remember. I think whenever I finished the year off, I had a couple of good grades and then most of them were just passing." She

received solid support from her learning coach as well as her cyber teachers, and this allowed her to be successful as measured by grades and course completion. On a personal level, she felt as if she was not as successful. She explained:

Whenever I started cyber school and everything else, it was easier at first, then throughout the year things got more complicated and that's when the depression kicked in. Everything got harder on me to start doing and having the motivation to get up and get in to logon and get my school work done.

While she struggled with the isolation of working by herself, she believed her educational needs were being met by the cyber-charter school. Even though she felt compelled to return to public school after a year for the social aspects, she felt as if she had grown personally as a result of her time in cyber-charter school. She related, "It really helped. It made me realize that sometimes things are better a different way and sometimes they're not. I think that I realized I could do the work, and that gave me a little more confidence in myself." While she was happy to get back to public school, she was proud of her accomplishments at Lincoln.

While Misty did all her work and passed most of her classes, she did not feel as if she was successful at Kennedy Cyber Charter School. She described the course she failed:

My biology class I had to drop out of because I just did not get it. It's very hard to learn from Kennedy in my opinion. I mean I've heard several people striving from it, but me personally, I just couldn't do it.

Misty had support from not only her learning coach, but also a group of church volunteers, mainly retirees, who would come to the church to help the students. Even

with this support, she struggled. She had difficulty accessing help from her cyber teachers, and that impacted her ability to understand some of the presented material. She was happy to leave her church program after her year was completed. When asked why she wanted to leave, she responded:

Because I didn't feel like my needs were being met. I mean maybe if I had heard better feedback maybe like just from a couple of people at church. I just felt like I wasn't making as much progress as I did in my home school cyber program. I didn't get the help I needed.

Unlike Misty, Jacob had no success while enrolled in Kennedy Cyber Charter School, but he is the first to admit that was his own fault. When asked about his success, he explained, "No, and that is my own fault. It's not from the school, it's my own. I had a lot going on. I didn't pay attention as much as I should have. I got distracted with my own personal business." When asked if he had passed any classes, he responded:

Nope, not all of them. That was mainly due to my lack of attendance because there were times when things would be happening and I wouldn't be able to make sessions. At this point in time I was an adult. I was 18 years of age so I did have to go find a job. I did have a lot to worry about so sometimes I would choose different things over schooling depending on how important they were.

Jacob confirms that he received solid support from his learning coach. When asking questions, he was also happy with the support he received from his Kennedy teachers. His learning coach, Susan, confirms that Jacob did not do the work that he was responsible to complete. He would waste time in the library watching movies and then try to complete all his work in the late evening before it was due. Jacob was unsuccessful at

Kennedy Cyber Charter due to his lack of effort rather than a lack of support from either his learning coach or his Kennedy teachers.

Shane had very little success while attending Lincoln Cyber Charter School. He struggled with the work and became frustrated when he wasn't given immediate attention from his cyber teachers. He described his experience in cyber-charter school:

I went to charter school and it just went downhill from there. I had to do summer school and other schooling to get back on track in order to go back to my home school, I had to go to an alternative school, so I did that my whole senior year just to be able to graduate, to earn all my credits. It was rough doing that whole year and summer school and stuff but it was what I had to do.

After getting to the point that he no longer would log on, his older sister intervened to help him make progress. When asked how many classes he took and how many he passed, both Shane and his mother could not remember how he actually did in cyber-charter school. Shane said he passed all of his classes, but his semester was interrupted by his arrest on criminal charges and his incarceration. Shane blames his decision to attend Lincoln Cyber Charter School with some of his current legal troubles:

I was able to study in public school because all my friends that were in school were fine and then I started hanging out with a different crowd of people after that. Those people went and got in trouble. If I would have been back in school, I wouldn't have been around them certain people and my life wouldn't be messed up like it is now.

A common thread in Shane's description of his time in cyber-charter school was that his struggles were always someone else's fault. He remained enrolled in Lincoln until his

arrest and incarceration. When asked what he felt about the time he spent online, Shane responded, “I wasn’t successful.”

While four of the five students involved in the study felt as if they made progress in cyber-charter school, none of them remained in the program longer than a year. The next section will concentrate on the perceptions of the learning coaches involved in the study. The second research question was also broken down into the three sub-questions that comprise the whole. These sub-questions were labeled. Each learning coach response is discussed and analyzed.

### **Research Question 2**

What are the Perceptions of Learning Coaches Who Were Responsible for Supervising Students Who Enrolled in a For-Profit Cyber-Charter School in Pennsylvania in Terms of their Students’ Learning and the Support They Received from the Cyber-Charter School?

Research Question 2 will be divided into three sections: learning coach perceptions of support in the home, learning coach perceptions of support from school, and learning coach perceptions of student achievement.

#### **Learning Coach Perceptions of Support in the Home**

When questioning learning coaches, the researcher tried to determine their perceptions of the learning environment that was established in their homes, or in two cases, outside of the home. Emphasis was placed on the work habits of their students and conflicts that may have arisen as a result of this new student/coach relationship. Four of the five learning coaches felt that their students received adequate support from them in the home environment.

Susan was an employee of a social service agency whose job entailed working with youth who were at-risk. As part of her job she was given the responsibility, along with others, of overseeing residents of the service's Independent Living Program. It was in this capacity that she first met Jacob. She described Jacob's responsibilities:

This client came to our program to be part of our apartment program, so when you are in the apartment you have to have to log either 30 hours of education, 30 hours of employment or 30 hours of volunteer work each week, and this client chose to do education and chose to do cyber school as opposed to regular education.

Susan was a non-traditional learning coach because she was appointed and had no prior experience with Jacob. She also had no input regarding Jacob's choice of educational provider. She explained:

The client did the research in terms of what cyber school he wanted to attend. He chose Kennedy. I know that he had tried to sign up with previous cyber schools and had not been successful in the past, but partially that was due to housing.

When we took this client on, he was facing homelessness and he had previously been homeless, so that had kind of put a bit of a kink in his educational career.

As an outside observer who had no prior relationship with Jacob, Susan was able to be dispassionate about her assessment of Jacob's situation. She related her observations:

I know that the reason he didn't want to pursue going back to his home school, which would have been the closest option in terms of public schools was because of anxiety. This client self-diagnosed as agoraphobic, which means fear of leaving

the house. That was never confirmed by a psychiatrist or a psychologist, but anxiety was the reason for pursuing cyber as opposed to regular education.

Susan's job was a difficult one. She described her role as learning coach for Jacob:

It kind of felt like fighting a losing battle because I felt like I was constantly getting information after the fact. I felt like going through that process, I was doing a lot to try to help the client understand navigating the website. I remember spending a whole day just teaching myself the website so I could help my client figure out how to get his assignments, how to submit his assignments, how to log in to classes. There really was no instruction that I knew of that was available to me as a coach, so it was kind of me self-teaching; I mean I had to be self-taught in order to help the client.

Her job was made more difficult by Jacob's unwillingness to embrace the program. As she explained:

It was very difficult. You know I would come to the apartment to start my day for work and it was often trying to get him up out of bed to get him started for the day, get started on assignments. There were lots of times where he just would become very frustrated and scream at me. He would verbalize his frustrations, 'I don't understand' was often said and 'This is too hard and I need help,' but when you offered that help, it was not well received.

Susan had real difficulty keeping Jacob on track. She related:

When he was on the computer it was very easy for him to say, yeah, I went to the library and I did school, but when I would do spot checks, he wouldn't actually be doing anything with school, and so he was doing a lot of it in the evening. With

me, we probably together would spend at least, I'd say, about 4 hours every week across the whole week so me checking in with him and saying: 'O.K. these are your grades,' and me helping him navigate the website.

Jacob's work habits were poor. Susan discussed her recollections:

Jacob would often wait to do work until late hours of the night. We encouraged him to utilize the library to do his work during the day. Because of the way that our apartment program is set up, kids had to be out of the apartment from 10:00 – 4:00 doing something, whether that be education, volunteering, or working, and so because he was doing education, and the library had free wi-fi, that is where he went. We really want our kids to learn how to be independent so that's finding resources in the community to accomplish what they are trying to accomplish. But he would often go to the library and watch Netflix or like watch illegally downloaded movies so then he would do his work in the evenings, and oftentimes I would come to the apartment in the morning and he would say, "I stayed up until 4:00 A.M. getting all this stuff done," but then when you would look at his grades, there was a lot of work that hadn't been turned in or completed.

After five months of working with Jacob, Susan was forced to recommend that Jacob be terminated from the program for non-compliance because he made no progress at Kennedy Cyber Charter School. She described the thinking of the Independent Living staff:

His grades were failing, and as part of the program you have to have passing grades in your educational pursuits. It's not enough to say 'O.K. I'm going to school, but I'm not putting forth any effort,' and he actually ended up losing his

spot in the apartment because of his failed attempts at completing school and refusal to do volunteer work subsequently after that.

Susan felt that she gave as much time and support to Jacob as her job would allow. However, this was not as much time as a parent or a relative in the home might be able to offer. Jacob needed constant supervision to keep on track, and without someone constantly looking over his shoulder, he did not put forth the necessary effort to be successful.

Mary, the mother of another student had a different experience. Mary moved to a new town and enrolled her daughter, Eve, in a new high school. As a “new” kid, Eve had some difficulties adapting to her new environment: She was being bullied. Mary explained, “Well, we had moved from the school she was in all her life and she didn’t want to go to a new school. So, she finally did go to the new school, and she was being picked on.” Mary was unhappy with the school’s response to her concerns about her daughter. As she recounted, “Well, the school really wasn’t doing anything about her getting picked on, so she would come home and cry every day and not want to go back in the morning.” Mary described her role as her daughter’s learning coach:

I don’t quite remember how they put it, but be the one to get her up and get her motivated in the morning to sit down and do her class work, to help her through whatever she needed to be helped through if she didn’t understand it and then if I didn’t understand it, then we had to contact her teacher. So then, usually we waited a day to contact the teacher to get back to us.

When asked what kind of help she provided, Mary explained:

Well, usually when I got home, we sat down and she would start doing her homework or her work, and then at the end, it was, “Mom can you sit down and help me with this or do this or figure out how to do this?” and it would be... a couple of hours of just trying to figure out because for me, I went business, and she was doing academic, so for me to help her it was actually harder for her to try and understand what I was telling her than learning it in the book.

Mary’s life as a learning coach was not an easy one. She found that motivating her daughter to get up in the morning and begin her schoolwork was a struggle. She recounted:

I thought she could do it, but my daughter’s one who isn’t an early bird. She would be five minutes before she had to be up at school out the door, so I figured if she could get herself up in the morning to get it done, she would be fine. But, she was doing great at first and then after, maybe two months it was awful getting her out of bed.

When Mary got a new job that required her to leave home at 4:00 A.M., the situation became more difficult:

So then when I would come home at 12:00, she’s still in bed. She wouldn’t get herself up to do school work. I’d have to get her up at 12:00 in the afternoon to do school work, so it was really hectic to get her motivated especially since I had started working and wasn’t here.

Even though Eve would not get up and begin her work until her mother got home, she did work diligently for the next six to eight hours. Mary helped as much as she could, but sometimes there were concepts that she did not understand. She explained:

Well, more or less I could help her except algebra and that, that I had to figure out and when I couldn't figure it out, she called and e-mailed the teachers or talked to her sister who was away at college to figure stuff out.

Her daughter did have academic success during her seven months enrolled in Lincoln Cyber Charter School. Mary was a big part of that success.

Another student, Tommy, was also eventually enrolled in a cyber-charter school. Fred loves his son, Tommy, and wants him to be successful. He watched Tommy struggle in the public school environment and realized something had to change. He described the situation:

Well, Tommy has some... issues, behavioral issues, mental issues. He has seen many therapists over the course of his schooling. As he got to be a teenager, it seemed like the issue got amplified, and he just couldn't function in a group environment. He was getting in trouble all the time, and so we just realized that he wasn't going to get an education if he was going to be in a regular classroom with, you know, students that would constantly distract him and tear him away from his concentration. Specifically, he had issues with concentration. He was very impulsive. ADHD, so those things all kind of worked against him being in a classroom setting.

Fred began to research cyber-charter options. He described what he discovered:

Our first exposure to it was Washington Cyber. We heard that there was some kind of seminar in town, and we went over there and learned about all that was involved. So we didn't have any idea about it other than just seeing commercials on T.V.

Fred described why he and his wife felt that cyber-charter would be a better option than public school:

We thought that he would be shielded from the distractions of his peers. They were constantly getting him into trouble. He would do things without thinking like if somebody would tell him to do something that they knew would get him in trouble in class, he would just do it and he would get into trouble. He didn't seem to understand the consequences of actions and that would be a lot more structured in an online setting. There wouldn't be anybody to get him in trouble. Our hope was that he would still be able to get an education with a lot fewer distractions that way. Plus, we could monitor his behavior more and keep him on task. You know, if he would get distracted, we could help him better.

When asked what his job as learning coach required, Fred explained how he approached the role:

What I did at the beginning was looked at the course list. I'm like, 'O.K. you have this many assignments you have to complete and then kind of gauged it by well, do you want to be done by this month? O.K. if so, you are going to have to do so many assignments per day' and kind of made a schedule throughout the year of what he had to do each day to keep up and so that's kind of how we did it. I made sure every day that he had the ones he had to do done and if he got behind then on the weekend well guess what? We're gonna catch up and try to keep him on track.

Fred was diligent about his role as learning coach. He described his approach:

We had to get on, check that he did his assignments. Like every day there was a page you had to get onto and O.K. everything he did, check on what lessons he

had coming up, and if they had to do like a portfolio type thing, which I was never very good at doing. All that kind of help he got from... well he was supposed to get from them, but like I said a friend, she was basically able to walk me through a little more because she already had already been experienced in it.

Fred's time as a learning coach was not without conflict. As he explained:

I mean there was conflict with my son every day over everything other than that. Cyber was just one extra thing. It wasn't because of the school. He would cause conflict no matter what the job was but it wasn't anything excessive, I mean we just wanted to make sure he did it. I required him to sit down and did not let him get up until he was done.

Tommy did well as a student, and then he turned 18. As his father describes it:

He was finally catching up, but then he turned 18, left our home and went off his medication. He took his Washington Cyber equipment with him, but I don't think he ever did anything more. Eventually, we received communication from Washington Cyber that he was no longer attending, so we tracked down the equipment and shipped it back.

Fred defended his approach:

In fact, if anything at the end of the... his graduation, I mean he graduated from his home school, that has bought him a lot of accomplishment. That's one thing even today that he's most glad that I pushed him to get his diploma. I'm not sure that he would have if we didn't have that option, so looking back you can see the benefit of it now. So in that case, in the end, it has helped our relationship.

Some learning coaches have more experience. Amy was an ‘old hand’ at being a cyber-charter learning coach. She explained her history with cyber-charter school:

Well, years ago my husband and I... my husband seems to move all over. We’ve been in many different states, O.K.? So we were forced to put our children into some program when they were younger, so we looked up online and saw that free computer, free books, free everything and we couldn’t afford to pay for all the books and everything that it cost, so we chose them years ago.

Her children were already enrolled in Kennedy Cyber Charter School when her church board began discussions about running a school program in the church basement that would combine cyber-charter school with religious instruction. The board approached Amy because she had the most experience. Amy recounted, “Oh, I knew quite a bit because I was very into it for probably, oh my, I want to say eight years, so I knew a lot about it.” Amy agreed to act as the learning coach for the program, and the church board chose Kennedy Cyber Charter School as the curriculum provider. They opened with twelve students. Amy described her role:

I was considered a coach or a helper to guide these kids, you know make sure that they went to class, make sure that they went downstairs to eat their lunch, and help them if they needed help with any kind of, like I don’t know... map or whatever the case may be and I was in charge of getting other helpers and telling them what to do like you know, like conduct a math class for the 6th graders or whatever the case was back then.

Amy was clear that her job entailed helping her students to succeed, and that she did not see her role as being a disciplinarian. She described how that dynamic worked:

If a student didn't do her assignment, then she would get an F on it and a list was printed out every... well I had access to it because I was able to see if they were doing their work or not. So I made sure all the kids were doing their work. When they didn't, then I would tell their parents and I'd say look, James isn't doing his work. He's not going to class. You know you're going to have to do something with him because I wasn't their disciplinarian, I was their guide, you know their coach to help them.

Amy was also responsible for recruiting helpers from the church congregation who would come in to work with the students and help them in their online classes. When asked what her day was like as the learning coach, Amy responded:

For the most part the kids were good Christian kids. They go to our church so I mean I knew them so it wasn't like they were kids... None of the kids ever disrespected me, ever. They never would outright look at me and say I'm not doing that. Whatever I told them to do, they did.

Amy continued in her role as the learning coach until the local school district superintendent visited her program. He explained to Amy how Kennedy Cyber Charter School is funded. That was surprising information for Amy. She recounted:

He sat me down and said, do you realize the school is not getting taxes because you're in this cyber school? And I did not know that. This was three, maybe four years ago. I can't remember the timing, and I told him I did not realize that. Well, as soon as he told me that, I immediately took my kids out of it so the local school district would get our tax money because I thought it was unfair that some huge

place from God knows where they are stationed is getting tax money and our school is suffering financially.

Without Amy to run the program, the church continued to run the program for the remainder of the school year and then eliminated it.

### **Learning Coach Perceptions of Support from School**

In the cyber-charter environment learning coaches replaced teachers as the main motivators of their students (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013). They became the disciplinarians who worked to keep their students on track. Part of their responsibilities included working with the cyber-charter school as partners whose overall mission is to offer the support that these five students needed to be successful in their courses. This partnership required a two-way communication. Three of the five learning coaches believed they received adequate support from their child's cyber-charter school.

Amy chose cyber-charter school for her children long before she became a learning coach in her church's program. She described why she got involved in online education:

The benefit in the beginning was for the convenience because of my husband and I moving so much, and having to pull my kids in and out of school. So we chose to so-called home-school them through the cyber charter and it was easier for me I guess because they did all the work. You know they kept all the records, you know they just did all the work. That's why I really liked them. Well, this is O.K., you get everything for free.

Because of her cyber experience, her church leaned heavily on her when they made the decision to open their own program. With twelve students to monitor and coach, Amy

needed to access the Kennedy teachers more often than if she only had one student. She described the help she received:

Well the teachers did always offer to help. They always said if you need help, they would... some of the teachers actually would... The teachers were very... I'd say most of the teachers were very, very, very good. I liked the teachers. I had not a problem with the teachers other than maybe one or two, and they would actually tell some students if you need to call me at home at night, just go ahead and do that. We'll set up a time. They were always willing to help so I would say the teachers were very good.

Amy was also happy with the level of communication she received as a learning coach.

She explained:

They had e-mail communications, they had phone communications, they had what they called Blackboard, a collaborative type of communications. You know teachers would actually take kids by themselves and set them up in this Blackboard collaborative type thing and go through whatever problems they can't understand and what not. So yeah, the teachers would go out of their way to help their students.

Amy felt as if the Kennedy teachers were very involved with her students. She described one trick they used to keep their students focused:

They had to participate in class so the teacher had set up, all the teachers had, which I thought was pretty ingenious, is they thought of a way to make sure that the kids aren't sleeping because you can go in the class and just go to sleep. They had ways to know... like every so often the teacher would say, "O.K., press the

green button.” So, if the kid’s sleeping, you know. Yeah, so they had ways or the teacher would say, “O.K. time to press the red button.” You know so but then if the kid wasn’t allowed or sleeping, then they wouldn’t be able to touch the red button.

Amy was pleased with the support she received from Lincoln Cyber Charter School in her role as learning coach.

Mary was very involved as her daughter Misty’s learning coach. She worked a full day and then came home to help her daughter with her school work. Many times Mary learned as much as her daughter did by helping her. When asked if she gained any knowledge from helping her daughter, Mary replied, “Actually, yes. I would say I learned.” When her daughter struggled, Mary would try to help or would enlist the help of her boyfriend or her older daughter, who was away at college. If there was a question that she was not able to answer and could not call on support from other resources, she did not hesitate to contact her daughter’s teachers. She found them very helpful. She explained:

Well, if I didn’t understand what was going on she had to e-mail her teacher.

Then sometimes she would get back to her right away and other times she would have to wait a couple of hours for whoever to get back to her.

When pressed to describe the relationship she had with the teachers at Lincoln Cyber Charter School, Mary answered:

It was pretty good. If I needed something, I had a contact person I could call and she was pretty good at calling me if I needed help with my daughter, she would give me a call back if I had called her so we were in close contact a lot.

Mary appreciated the timely response she got when her daughter asked for help. Overall, she felt that Lincoln met her daughter's needs. Her daughter left cyber-charter school because of the loneliness involved in working at home rather than any issue they had with the school.

Fred was satisfied with the support he and Tommy received from Washington Cyber Charter School. He described how his son would access help from his teachers, "Well, he'd come to me and if I wasn't around, if I was working, then he would be able to e-mail his teacher so they communicated a lot back and forth through the computer." When asked about how his son could interact with his teacher during the lesson, Fred replied:

Right, so in Washington Cyber setting it was a live teacher. He could ask questions. It was like Facetime almost. He didn't have a camera on him, He could see the teacher, but none of the students could see each other. It was a live environment so if he had a question, he could interrupt and ask it and his teacher could immediately answer it.

Fred worked with his son as much as his schedule would allow, but he also counted on his son's teachers to let him know if there was a problem. He explained:

If the class was 9:00 to 10:00, he had to log in by 9:00 and stay logged in the entire time. They monitored that pretty close and if he didn't log in, it was almost like an absent day and they would contact us.

Fred felt that his son's teachers were very good at responding to any concerns he had. They were quick to get back to him and would contact him by phone or by e-mail if his son began to struggle with assignments or if he was not logging on the required number

of hours. Fred believed that Washington Cyber Charter School met both his and his son's needs.

Susan, Jacob's coach, always felt as if she was playing "catch-up." She had a limited amount of time available to devote to Jacob, whom she felt needed more supervision. Because Jacob was in a program that was designed to foster independence, he was expected to make any contact that needed to be made with his teachers at Kennedy Cyber Charter School if he was having problems. Jacob would not take this initiative. As a result, Jacob would wait for Susan to come and help him rather than initiating contact himself. Susan described forcing Jacob to seek help: "He used it when I insisted that we had gotten to the point that we needed to use it, but he was not using it independently." When Jacob struggled, he would go to Susan first, and if she wasn't able to help him, she would contact Kennedy with Jacob. She described the process: "He came to me, and I tried to figure it out. That often resulted in calling, trying to e-mail, but it was very hard to get ahold of people." Even though Jacob was not willing to take the time to access help from Agora, Susan felt that even if he was willing, it would have proved difficult. In her experience working with Jacob, Susan believed that he was not well supported by Kennedy Cyber Charter School.

Krystal agreed to enroll her son, Shane, in Lincoln Cyber Charter School against her better judgment. She was told that her son would get the one-on-one attention that he needed and was not getting in public school. She described how she was disappointed:

He did have some issues with, like there were a few times where he did actually try to get ahold of the teachers. It wasn't what I thought it was going to be. Like they were supposed to do more of a one-on-one, and they offer that, but a lot of

times when you tried to get ahold of the teachers, they weren't so great at getting back ahold with you.

Initially, Shane was able to get help from his teachers, but according to Krystal, that changed over time. She explained:

Well, like I said he was supposed to be able to get ahold of the teachers, which at first worked out, but then as time went on, I don't know if he just got frustrated or what, but then if I didn't know how to do something, my friend who has two kids in it now, they both still do the Lincoln, she'd help.

When Shane was able to contact his teachers, he did receive help. Krystal described this help:

If he got ahold of them they would either phone call, mostly 99% of the time it was a phone call. On very rare occasions they would do the Skype thing. Most of the time they would just call and talk to him over the phone and try to help him work through the lessons.

Krystal described her responsibility of getting on the Lincoln website and making checkmarks to acknowledge the work her son had completed. She felt this was an inconvenience. Krystal described her feelings:

Just having to... how I said how you had to get on and log on and just even O.K. that they did the lesson. Well, they did the lesson. It's on there. I don't understand why at the end of every night I would have to get on and say, O.K. you know? That just seemed a little much.

Krystal was not satisfied with the support her son received from Lincoln. She felt as if they had overstated the support Shane would receive when he enrolled. She summed up

her experience: “Well, like I said at first they seemed all interested like everything was going to go good and I don’t know who lost interest in what, but someone did.”

### **Learning Coach Perceptions of Student Achievement**

Achievement from the learning coaches’ perspective was again determined by passing grades and course completion. Four of five learning coaches reported that their student achieved some level of success during their time as students in cyber-charter school.

Susan was disappointed that her student, Jacob had no success in cyber-charter school. She did her best to support him, but without self-motivation, she felt that Jacob never had any chance of success. When asked why she thought Jacob was not successful at Kennedy, she shared her thinking:

I think that there were a lot of things. I think his mental health played a huge factor. I think that, you know, his previous instability before coming to the apartment. The family that he is in contact with was very difficult to deal with, and I think that played a piece of his mental health. I would say also although he had dreams for himself, none of them were very clear, and when it came to actually putting forth the work to do something that wasn’t something that he was comfortable with, so he felt, I think, more comfortable staying in the stage of contemplation rather than actual doing.

Jacob freely admits that his lack of progress was his own fault. He lacked the self-discipline required to regulate his own behavior and to complete his assignments in a timely manner. When interviewed, Jacob claimed that he did pass some of his classes, but Susan contradicts that assertion:

He did not complete what he started. I don't know that he had a single passing grade in any of the classes that he took and he ended up just not following through with it and kind of just walked away from it. That's the best way to put it. He would be considered a cyber school dropout.

With the work ethic Jacob bought to his cyber-charter attempt, Susan felt his results would have been the same regardless of what school he attended.

While Krystal was not happy about the support she and her son, Shane received from Lincoln Cyber Charter School, she believes he was ultimately successful in the program. She recounted: "He did alright. Like I said, he started off better than he ended, but he still did alright." When asked about his grades in cyber-charter school, she explained: "His grades were average. He passed, but his grades were average." When pressed regarding how many classes Shane took and how many he competed, she was less sure, "Now that I really don't remember. He would have had to finish them to move on." While she was happy that Shane ultimately was successful in his endeavors at Lincoln, she doesn't recommend it to her friends. She described her feelings about online education:

I've seen too many kids doing that flip flopping in and out of the cyber schools just since I've done that with my son and half of them don't want to do anything anyway cause they end up going back into regular school and they're behind then because they really didn't learn anything. They didn't want to get on and do their lessons, then they go back to school and they're behind everybody they were in with. I seen that a lot. Like I said just since I did that with my son.

Fred felt his son, Tommy, was successful at Washington Cyber Charter School when he was living at home and enjoyed the support of his teachers and his father. Once he moved and lost that support, he stopped logging on altogether. He also stopped taking his medication and got himself into trouble. Fred explained:

He spent several months in jail and when he was released, moved back into our home with his assurance he would go back to school and get medical treatment.

After getting him back into therapy and treatment, we made efforts to re-enroll him in school and discovered our home school's online program, which he chose and eventually graduated from.

Fred felt that cyber-charter was the best option for his son and fit the way he worked and learned well. Tommy's home school cyber program required students to come in once a week to get help and meet with the teacher. Tommy connected with this teacher and that helped make something that was working well even better in Fred's opinion.

Amy felt that Misty achieved solid success during her time with Kennedy Cyber Charter School. Other than her biology class, which she had to drop, Misty passed all of her classes. Because she had eleven other students, Amy looked at student success holistically. When asked about student success, she replied:

Depends on which kid. All the kids were different, learn different, some had strong points, some had very weak points. Overall, they all did what they were supposed to do and you know I mean if they didn't, I would know. I knew exactly if they did not do their work, Overall, I believe they did what they were supposed to do.

During the time that Amy oversaw her church program, not all her students were as successful as Misty. She discussed two students who were not as successful:

No, I had a couple of students who failed a couple of classes. They had to take them over. They did not all pass. Actually there was an older girl I had who failed two classes and she had to re-take them the following year. She took them through summer school for one of them I believe.

Amy had a unique perspective on cyber-charter school in general, and Kennedy Cyber Charter School in particular because of her varied experience dealing with many students with differing ability levels. When asked why some students succeeded, while others failed, she offered the following explanation:

It's got to have to do with the program. I mean it would have to. The program would have to be set up to help the children to learn. If you have three children taking the same exact course, and the same teacher and one of them fails it and two of them pass it, well, it's the program. The program is going to teach two of them and one of them just, I don't know, maybe they just refused to listen or they didn't want to do it or it could be, but I think it's the children. That's what I think, I don't know, I'm not an expert.

As far as Amy was concerned, Misty was one of her success stories.

Mary did not enjoy her role as a learning coach. She constantly had to fight to get her daughter, Eve, up to log on and do her assignments. She felt she was supported by Eve's teachers at Lincoln Cyber Charter School, but that did not help her daughter cope with the sense of isolation and the ensuing depression she encountered. Mary felt as time went on, Eve began to become more diligent with her schoolwork. She explained: "She

actually did pretty good once she figured out that mom had to work all the time now and she had to be up and once she got up and got her work done she did really good.” In fact, Mary felt that Eve was doing better in cyber-charter school than she did at her home school. She recounted:

Actually, from the time she was in regular school, she was getting Ds and Fs and when she transferred to the charter school she was getting Bs and Cs, so it actually benefited her more or less to be in the charter school and getting the help there than it did being in school at the time.

Eve was able to pass all of her classes during the seven months she spent at Lincoln. That success however, did not come without a cost. Although she did well in her classes the personal toll that Eve paid in loneliness made both her and Mary happy when Eve decided to return to her home school environment the following year.

Of the five learning coaches interviewed, only Fred felt as if his son, Tommy, achieved real success in cyber-charter school. Mary believed her daughter achieved success academically, but socially her feelings of isolation made the online program unsustainable from an emotional standpoint.

The next section will look at both student and learning coach perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in cyber-charter school over remaining in traditional school. As with the first two research questions, the third research question will be divided into sub-questions. First, student perceptions will be explored, followed by learning coach perceptions.

### **Research Question 3**

What are the Perceptions of Students Who Left Their Brick-and-Mortar Schools to Enroll in For-Profit Cyber-Charter Schools in Pennsylvania and Their Learning Coaches in Terms of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Leaving Traditional Education for an Online Experience?

Research Question 3 will be divided into four sections: student perceptions of advantages, student perceptions of disadvantages, learning coach perceptions of advantages, and learning coach perceptions of disadvantages.

#### **Student Perceptions of Advantages**

These five students who spent time in both cyber-charter school and traditional school have a unique perspective, which gave them the ability to compare both types of schooling. All five left their home schools because of perceived issues they were having there. They enjoyed varying levels of success in the online environment. However, they each have strong opinions about their experiences. This section will discuss some of the advantages of being a cyber-charter student from the shared perspectives of one or more students who felt cyber-charters did something better than their traditional school.

Three of the five students enjoyed the flexibility that working online provided them. Each of these three liked that they could do their work when it suited them without the structure of traditional school. When asked what she liked best about cyber-charter school, Misty replied, “the flexibility. I could miss a class and it would be O.K. The recordings were always there with the teacher so you could go on and listen to the whole class.” Shane also liked the freedom to choose his own time to work, although not always for good reasons. He explained, “Instead of having like a set thing like public school’s

classes, you could not get online for three days do your classes and get on one day quick and finish them up.” Tommy explained that he liked the flexibility to determine when he did his work:

They had kind of a schedule like a guideline of when you should do this or whatever like days and stuff that it was really ultimately up to me, so I was able to work it in and work around that so it wasn’t like I was you know always dull.

Another advantage mentioned was that cyber-charter school met the personal needs of two of the five students. Tommy and Jacob felt that working on their own in an online environment school was a better fit for the way they worked and learned. Tommy explained his feelings:

Here’s the deal, I know a lot of people say in public school you have to concentrate more. I actually disagree because when you’re doing most of the work yourself you really know, well, O.K. I gotta pay attention, I gotta know what to do because you realize that you’re responsible for a lot of it so, and plus there were less distractions, not people trying to goof off or whatever, and it was relaxed because it was at my own house, you know so yeah, I think it was great for me.

Jacob suffered from anxiety and the online environment was much more comfortable for him than his home school. He recounted:

Like I said with cyber-school, I was able to focus more on my studies instead of what was going on around me at the time. I am a visual and audio learner. It was nice to have a screen with everything that the teacher was trying to teach while she was saying it at the same time without distractions.

## **Student Perceptions of Disadvantages**

The perceptions of disadvantages of the online environment were more prevalent than the perceptions of advantages among the five students interviewed. The most common complaint among the student participants was that cyber-charter school was harder than their home school. Four of five students believed that was the case. When asked about the level of difficulty at Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Jacob commented: “I would say it was more challenging. When you are actually focusing and you are able to actually learn things.” Misty also felt that working in the online environment was more difficult. She recounted:

I found it to be tougher just because the teacher wasn't there to help you. I mean just listening to their voice, I mean they still did like you could see them writing on like a chalk board, but you couldn't see them.

Shane echoed those same sentiments: “Like some of the work I did I had already learned at public school, but then it started moving on and I didn't know what it was. It became harder and harder.” Tommy also found cyber schooling more difficult. He stated his belief: “Actually, surprisingly, I found it more challenging.” The students' responses reflect a perception of difficulty that goes beyond the rigor of the material presented. It points to the difficulty the students faced in adapting to a new way of being taught (Hendricsen, 2014).

Another way that students had to adapt to within the cyber-charter school environment is the lack of interaction with peers. Students went from having dozens of human interactions during their public school days to working alone and sometimes with

just a learning coach. This change was not without difficulties. Three of the five students felt a sense of isolation while working at home, and missed interacting with their friends.

Eve left her school because she was being picked on as the “new” kid. When she began cyber-charter school, she found that she spent all of her time in her apartment without interaction with anyone but family members. Because she slept late every morning, she did her school work in the afternoon and evening. This left little time for social pursuits. She described how this isolation affected her:

Cyber charter definitely had tolls that, like it had taken tolls on me and things like that. It was a little more complicated than I thought it was going to be, and basically when I went there to cyber school, all my friends had left, so I got depressed and things like that. Everything got harder on me to start doing and having the motivation to get up and get in to log in and get my school work done.

Shane also struggled with the isolation of working alone: “I missed just the experience of actually going through public school with my friends and everything. I just didn’t talk to anybody after that.” While Misty was involved in her church program that also included eleven other students, she was the oldest and felt the isolation of not having age appropriate peers in the program. This contributed to her returning to her home school the following year. She explained her decision: “One of the reasons I left that program was because I wanted to graduate with my class.”

Technical difficulties also were seen as a disadvantage. Two of five students felt that technical issues with the cyber-charter provider hindered their ability to complete work in a timely manner. Misty described the technical issues she encountered:

They had a lot of problems with their technology that you would have to... like it would take forever to log into your classes. They could fix that. It just took forever to log in to one class. Sometimes I was 30 minutes late to a class.

Shane also encountered technical issues that added to his frustration with his cyber-charter school. He discussed one recurring problem:

There were certain times where, I forget what it was but computers... you'd be in the middle of taking a test or something and they'd sign you out and half the time you couldn't go back into the test. You had to wait and get ahold of somebody.

That'd take a day. It was just a big run around thing. It sucked.

These technical issues were only a contributing factor in Misty and Shane's overall opinion of their cyber-charter schools.

### **Learning Coach Perceptions of Advantages**

While the majority of the student participants felt that cyber-charter school was more difficult than public school, three of the five learning coaches stated that they believed that cyber-charter school was easier. Amy felt that Kennedy made it on easier on her students so they would be successful and would continue in the program. She explained:

I would say it was easier. I would say easier because the teachers well... the cyber schools, in my opinion, are out to get the grades so they can get their tax money.

That's my opinion. So, they're going to do everything they can to make sure everybody passes.

While Fred believed that the work his son was asked to do was easier than what he would have encountered in public school, he felt that the lack of rigor benefited his son. He explained his thinking:

Personally, I think that the work was easier. I don't know how he would've thought it was, but I think any school work he would've thought was hard. I thought the requirements and the testing would have been considered easier, but it's still difficult for him.

When Mary was asked if Kennedy Cyber Charter School was easier or harder than Eve's regular school, she answered:

I'm thinking it's easier because if she needed something from Kennedy, the teacher could do the one-on-one with her over talking on the phone or sending the e-mails back and forth to figure it out. In the public school building the teachers were all, "O.K., we've got to move on. We can't do this right now" and they wouldn't make time to actually show her what was going on.

Two students, Jacob and Tommy, were well suited to the cyber-charter environment. Susan, Jacob's learning coach, was not in agreement with the choice he made to attend cyber-charter school. Her concern was mainly a function of Jacob's unwillingness to make the effort required to be successful and his lack of motivation. However, she felt that with Jacob's anxiety in public settings, cyber-charter school was an option that made complete sense: "This client preferred isolation and had some social anxiety so cyber-charter should have been a perfect choice for him. However, it took a level of motivation that he just didn't have." Susan was not an opponent of cyber-charter

school because she believed that while it could have served Jacob well, it was up to him to make that happen.

Fred was satisfied with his decision to enroll Tommy in Washington Cyber Charter School. He described his feelings:

I really had no other choice to be honest with you. Regular school was just failing him. He was just getting into so much trouble, and we had to do something and our options were the partial program or online school. We tried all of them. We tried all of them, and the one that actually got him to come to the end, the finish line, was charter school, and if I didn't have that, I don't know where he'd be right now. So in our case, I think it was the right decision.

Both Susan and Fred felt that the choice to enroll in cyber-charter school was a good choice for their students and these schools, Kennedy Cyber Charter School and Washington Cyber Charter School both offered a program that fit the way their students worked and learned.

### **Learning Coach Perceptions of Disadvantages**

Learning coaches complained more about experiencing technical difficulties with their cyber-charter schools than their students did. Three of five learning coaches reported having some type of technical issue that impacted their students' ability to turn in assignments. Fred felt that Washington Cyber Charter School met his son's needs, but also related that they encountered some technical difficulties with the connection while working online. He described what he believed was their biggest shortcoming:

Most of the time, with Washington Cyber I think the biggest problem he was having was technical issues, not being able to log in. He would try to log in and it

would say unable to connect or something was wrong with the software that they used to join into the class and he wouldn't be able to watch it. That's the only thing. The computer really caused a lot of problems sometimes, and they would have to replace the computer.

Susan also reported that Jacob experienced technical difficulties while working online at Kennedy Cyber Charter School. She explained:

I know that he had classes he was supposed to log into, but oftentimes, and this was an honest complaint that he had because I tried to help him with it myself many times and struggled, but getting logged into those classes could be very difficult. Another thing that he often had trouble with was submitting assignments. So even when he would do the work, getting it to upload and go through was sometimes a headache.

These difficulties had the effect of making a frustrating situation even more frustrating.

Amy also experienced technical problems in her church program while working with Kennedy Cyber Charter School. She related: "There were internet issues. There was always issues with Kennedy. I had a lot of issues with Kennedy. I mean that was probably the biggest issue right there. The internet issues." As with the student perceptions, the learning coaches' perceptions of these technical problems were described only as aggravations rather than factors that had a major influence over success or failure.

Three of the students studied reported feeling a negative sense of isolation as they worked in the online environment. Not surprisingly, their learning coaches corroborated their stories. Three of the five learning coaches reported that their student suffered from loneliness while enrolled in their cyber-charter school. While Amy did not notice any

outward signs of loneliness from Misty, she understood that working in cyber-charter school can be isolating. She explained her experience with her own children, who were also enrolled in the church program: “My kids struggled in cyber-charter. Not academically, they just struggled in it because they liked to be social, I guess. They liked to be around all the other kids and be in a classroom type of setting.” Krystal also noticed that her son, Shane, was struggling being home by himself all day. She remarked, “Well, he had friends at home, but as far as school friends, no, there weren’t any. I think he was kind of lonely.” Mary, more than the other learning coaches, saw the toll that working alone took on her daughter, Eve. She described the effects:

Well, she did get depressed for a couple of months because it was just her here and not doing anything else. She was always here doing her school work. Like I said, we’d work on it till 8:00 - 9:00 at night, from lunch time until then so it was always school work and no social life.

These three learning coaches felt that the isolation of working alone was a contributing factor in their decisions to leave cyber-charter school.

When asked their opinion on whether cyber-charter school or public school offers children a better education, all five learning coaches stated that they believed public school offered a more complete learning experience. Amy did not mince words: “Cyber school is junk. O.K.? The public school would have been better in my opinion.” Fred was more circumspect in his answer. While he felt that Washington Cyber Charter School met his son’s needs, he was not willing to concede that the education that Tommy received there was better than the one he himself received in public school. He explained:

I think the Washington Cyber guys do their very best given what they have... I'm trying to compare it to my own experience with school and the teachers I had but some of them were really, really good so I guess that's a pretty high bar.

Krystal was clear about her feelings toward the time Shane spent at Lincoln Cyber Charter School:

Even though the work was more advanced, I don't think he really learned much. He basically just had to do the lessons and just get through it. I thought it would have worked out the other way around, but yeah, I don't think he really... I mean he learned stuff clearly, but I don't know - I think he would have been better off in school.

Susan also felt that the work being asked of Jacob was not up to the public school standards. She related:

I don't know that they are even comparable. Perhaps had he done the work and been more dedicated, it might be more comparable, but just reading through the assignments it just didn't have the rigor of what I would have expected from a 12th grade curriculum.

When balancing the student and learning coach perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of attending cyber-charter school, the disadvantages outweighed the advantages from the perspectives of both the learning coaches and the students. This disparity of opinion might provide insight as to the reasons none of the students remained in cyber charter school longer than a year, and why no students graduated from their cyber charter school. In the next section data that was revealed during the interviews that

does not directly provide answers to the three research questions, but are significant nonetheless, will be discussed and analyzed.

### **Other Significant Data**

Besides answering the specific research questions, the interviews with the five students and their learning coaches also illuminated some other pertinent information, as well as opinions and attitudes that they held about their experiences with cyber-charter school. It is worth noting that none of the five students stayed in cyber-charter school for more than a year, and none of them graduated from Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Lincoln Cyber Charter School, or Washington Cyber Charter School. However, with the exception of Jacob, all the students managed to graduate from high school. The remaining four students all returned to their home school to finish their high school education and earned their diplomas there. Two of the students, Tommy and Misty, enrolled in their home school's cyber program and continued to experience success. The other two, Shane and Eve, returned to the public school environment for their senior year and earned enough credits to graduate from their home school. Jacob was the only student in the study who did not graduate and he is now looking into high school equivalency programs.

One of the drawbacks of cyber-charter school that was made clear from the study is that three of the student subjects suffered from the isolation of working in the online environment. This sense of loneliness was confirmed by their learning coaches. All three of the cyber-charter schools that these five students attended offered social opportunities for all their students. The only students who chose to take advantage of these opportunities were the students who reported that they felt cyber-charter school met their

needs, Tommy and Jacob. Tommy and his dad, Fred, attended several Washington Cyber Charter School social events and enjoyed them. Jacob did not attend events due to his anxiety in crowds, but he did make some connections in Kennedy Cyber Charter School's student chat room. The three students who felt the most isolated did not take advantage of any socialization opportunities offered by their school.

One personal characteristic that all of the participants in the study, students and learning coaches, commented on was the need for students to be self-motivated in order to succeed in cyber-charter school. As noted by Cooper-Parham (2015) working independently without a teacher there to motivate students and help them when they struggle is a challenge for any cyber-charter student. Even Jacob, who had little self-motivation, accepted that it was a prerequisite in order to complete the work in an unstructured environment.

Two of the five students, Tommy and Misty, returned to their home school but went into their home school's cyber program. This program required students to spend one day a week at school working with the teacher who monitors the program. To both Tommy and Misty, this one day at school made all the difference. Fred explained:

Tommy really needed the extra support that the in-person visits offered. I must say, too, that his teacher was fantastic and went above and beyond for Tommy in many ways. Her determination was inspiring. I don't know if Tommy would have succeeded had it not been for her efforts and dedication. She even came to our house to personally deliver his diploma and congratulate him. Her personal touch made our home school cyber program the best choice.

Misty also had good things to say about her home school's cyber program. She related:

I liked my home school program because there was a teacher there working with you one-on-one, and that was very helpful. Kennedy was not like that at all. With my home school's online program, the teacher helped you 24-7 when you needed it. She was on top of everything.

Another significant point made clear from the study is the participants' current attitudes about cyber-charter school in general. Having gone through it, both students and learning coaches were asked if they would repeat the experience knowing what that entailed. Of the students, only Tommy and Jacob said they would be willing to re-enroll in cyber-charter school. Fred was the only learning coach who said he would repeat the experience, and that was only because he believed it was the only option for his son that offered any chance of success. Susan did a good job of summing up the prevailing attitude among learning coaches:

I think Jacob would have done better in public school. I think that having a set time where this is where you're going to work on your school work and having the support of teachers and counselors and administrators for him to have access to like the student assistance program. I think all those things would have been incredibly helpful for him. I think that having to go and interact with his peers, maybe finding some positive supports at his age level would have been incredibly helpful. And I just think he would have been so much more successful had he been willing to do that.

These additional data add much to the understanding of the results of the five students' time in cyber-charter school. One hundred percent of the participants left cyber-charter prior to graduation. The average time that the five students were enrolled in

Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Lincoln Cyber Charter School, or Washington Cyber Charter School was 7.2 months. Eighty percent of the students in the study graduated from high school after leaving cyber-charter school. Only one student/learning coach pair, Tommy and Fred, said they would re-enroll in cyber charter school if faced with the decision again.

### **Summary**

This qualitative case study involved five students who are economically disadvantaged and were enrolled in Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Lincoln Cyber Charter School, or Washington Cyber Charter School as well as their learning coaches. The study sought to examine their perspectives of their experiences in cyber-charter school. The research questions endeavored to determine how students and their learning coaches perceived the learning environment in the home, the kind of support they received from their cyber-charter school, and what their perceived levels of success were. The study also identified what students and their learning coaches believed about the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling in cyber-charter school as opposed to remaining in their traditional school. Through the testimonies of these five students and their learning coaches, a clearer picture of how both groups of participants felt about their cyber-charter school experiences emerged. Themes were identified that impacted students' progress in cyber-charter school.

In Chapter Five, the themes identified in Chapter Four will be summarized and discussed. Implications of the results of the study will be discussed and analyzed through the theoretical framework of the Multiple Paradigm Approach to ethics in education. Using the testimonies of students and their learning coaches about what worked and did

not work for them, suggestions for improvement of the cyber-charter environment will be explored. Finally, Chapter Five provides a list of recommendations for further study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Charter School Law that was passed in 1997, known as Act 22, governs cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania. The Commonwealth's charter school system is intended to improve pupil learning, increase learning opportunities for all pupils, encourage the use of differing and innovating teaching methods, provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system, and hold the schools established under this act accountable for meeting measurable academic standards (Pennsylvania Public School Code Amendment, 1997 p. 18-19). Currently there are 14 cyber-charter schools operating in Pennsylvania. The tremendous growth of cyber-charter schools over the past several years, however, has not been without controversy. There are some educators who believe that cyber-charter schools meet the goals set forth by Act 22. They believe that cyber-charters are an innovative way to enhance school choice and that they are as effective as traditional brick-and-mortar schools, and in some cases, better (Brady et al., 2010; Wiley, 2009). Others claim that cyber-charters drain resources from already cash-strapped districts. Their argument is that cyber-charters are not as effective in teaching their students and that profit motive is a major determinant of policy (DeJarnatt, 2013; Saul, 2011).

#### **Summary of the Results**

Of the five students interviewed as part of this case study, two felt their cyber-charter schools served them well. Both Tommy and Jacob left their home schools because they were uncomfortable in that placement. Tommy felt that he did not fit in because he

was one of the “weird kids”. His ADHD kept him from focusing and made it difficult for him to succeed in a public school setting. Jacob, on the other hand, left his home school because he had real anxiety in crowds, which made his time in public school difficult. Both of these students found what they were looking for in cyber-charter school. Both felt that cyber-charter school met their needs and fit better than public school with the way they worked and learned.

However, neither completed the classes for which they enrolled at their for-profit cyber-charter school. Tommy moved out of his house once he turned 18 and stopped working on his assignments for Washington Cyber Charter School. It was not until he moved back home and enrolled in his home school’s cyber program that he was able to get back on track and do the work necessary to graduate. Jacob never put forth the effort necessary to be successful at Kennedy Cyber Charter School. Once he was dismissed from his placement in his independent living program, he made no effort to continue his education in cyber-charter school. This lack of success of both these students should not lead to a condemnation of the efficacy of cyber-charter school. Had Tommy remained on his medication and continued living at home, he could have quite possibly graduated from Washington Cyber Charter School. If Jacob had been more diligent about logging on and completing assignments, there is a chance he could have been successful, as well. Jacob’s learning coach, Susan, believed he had the ability to do the work, but he lacked the motivation to complete tasks. Absent these circumstances that contributed to Tommy and Jacob leaving their chosen cyber-charter schools, both of these students had the ability to be successful online. They both felt that they were well-served in their programs and believed online education was the best choice for them Niederberger

(2012) suggested that cyber-charter schools can be a viable alternative for students who cannot succeed in a traditional classroom.

The other three students in the study had a different experience. Eve, Misty, and Shane did not enjoy their time in cyber-charter school. While all of them achieved success in terms of passing grades and completed courses, each of them left their cyber-charter school because they felt that the for-profit online environment did not fit the way they worked and learned.

Eve believed that Lincoln Cyber Charter School supported her fully. Her decision to leave was based on her overwhelming sense of isolation as she worked at home. Misty did not like studying at Kennedy Cyber Charter School. She missed working with a live teacher. She was previously enrolled in her home school's online program and felt that that particular program better met her needs. When she left Kennedy, she went back to that program and graduated. Misty liked working in an online program from home, but she felt her church program that relied on Kennedy Cyber Charter School was not effective.

Shane had a completely negative experience at Lincoln Cyber Charter School. As a student with special needs, he was offered no accommodations and had difficulty learning from teachers on his computer. He complained about the lack of support from Lincoln, which contrasts with Eve's report on their helpfulness. Shane admits that he stopped working when he struggled to complete his assignments, and there is a possibility that he did not ask for help as much as he claimed. Even his mother, Krystal, is unclear about his efforts to get help. She was firm that he did not receive help from his school, but was not sure "who gave up on who." What is clear from both Shane and his mother

is that he was not suited to work in the online environment. It is likely that Shane's results at Lincoln would have been the same if he enrolled at Kennedy or Washington Cyber Charter. The method of delivery did not meet his needs. He needed one-on-one attention that he said he could not get in cyber-charter school. Shane's experience calls into question the types of specialized instruction special needs students are offered in cyber-charter school. In their study, Carnahan and Fuller (2013) found that very little research on special needs students enrolled in cyber-charter schools had been conducted. Cyber-charter schools are public schools and are required by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide identified students with accommodations to help them interact with the curriculum (United States Department of Education, 2018).

As students' and learning coaches' experiences were examined and analyzed, themes began to emerge that informed the debate about the efficacy of cyber-charter schools. The next section examines the positive aspects of for-profit cyber-charter schools as described by the students and learning coaches involved in the study.

### **Positive Aspects of Cyber-Charter Schools**

As participants in the study related their experiences, there were several aspects of their time in for-profit cyber-charter schools that were described positively. The positive themes that were most prevalent from descriptions related by some students and their learning coaches were that students felt supported at home, students enjoyed the flexibility that working from home provided, students took advantage of social opportunities offered by their schools, and that students who felt they could not function in public school were more comfortable working online.

One of the most important themes to come out of the study is the need for cyber-charter students to be supported in the home in order to be successful. This finding is consistent with the literature (Cooper-Parham, 2015; Figueiredo-Brown, 2015). All five student participants felt they received adequate support in the home. With that support, four of the five students in the study achieved success in their cyber-charter school. All of the learning coaches, with the exception of Susan, felt that their students were provided adequate support in their homes to be successful.

For two participants, Jacob and Misty, home support was not traditional in that support was not directly provided by a parent or loved one. All of the students in the study needed and received support from their learning coaches. All student participants enjoyed almost constant access to their learning coaches except Jacob, whose learning coach had other professional responsibilities that limited her time with Jacob. It is not surprising that Jacob was the only student in the study that did not achieve success in cyber-charter school. Susan contended that without someone looking over his shoulder, Jacob was more likely to remain unengaged with Kennedy Cyber Charter School. There is no guarantee that if he had a full-time learning coach to help motivate him, he would have been successful. Jacob was not always the easiest person to motivate according to Susan. He admitted that he did not take well to efforts to get him up in the morning. Susan confirmed that often her efforts to motivate Jacob ended in screaming matches. Because Susan was not a member of his family, she did not hold the authority a parental figure would, and Jacob often ignored her efforts to help him. It is impossible to say if Jacob would have been successful with more support from the staff that directed his

group home. Susan was unsure if there was a family member who could motivate Jacob to complete the work she felt he had the ability to do.

One of the criticisms of cyber-charter school is that students tend to work in isolation and miss the social interactions they had in their public school (Chi-Yuan & Rueda, 2012; Cooper-Parham, 2015). Davis (2011) stated that adding a layer of socialization could make the difference between success and failure in a cyber-charter student's experience. For Tommy and Jacob, the two students in the study that were satisfied with their online experience, getting away from those social interactions was the biggest selling point of enrolling in cyber-charter school. Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Lincoln Cyber Charter School, and Washington Cyber Charter all offer their students socialization opportunities. While Jacob did not participate in the face-to-face gatherings, he did use Kennedy's chat room frequently to talk with other cyber students and sometimes to get help with his assignments. Jacob enjoyed this aspect of Kennedy because it met his social needs without the need for him to physically interact with other people. Tommy went to several student outings hosted by Washington Cyber Charter School with his father and enjoyed them. He liked interacting with other students when they were not involved in school work. None of the three students who were unhappy with their cyber-charter experience took advantage of the socialization activities offered by their schools. Perhaps if they had, their feelings of isolation may have been mitigated.

One of the unique features of cyber-charter schools is that it allows students some flexibility to accomplish tasks on their own schedule. This freedom appealed to three of the students involved in the study: Misty, Shane, and Tommy. In public school their schedules were pre-determined and regulated by bells. In the home environment, they

determined when they did their schoolwork. There were synchronous classes that they had to log into by a certain time, but their day was not nearly as strictly-regimented as it was in their home school. This flexibility allowed them to start and stop as they felt the need. This kind of freedom required them to be motivated enough to keep up with their assignments. Misty tended to work ahead of her schedule and Tommy kept to the schedule he agreed upon with his father. Shane saw the flexibility as a grace period that allowed him to procrastinate until the very last minute and then finish all the assigned work right before the deadline. While all three used the flexibility differently, their cyber-charter schools were not concerned about their work habits as long as their assignments were completed and submitted on time. If they were not, the student was penalized. Different people in all walks of life handle deadlines differently. This group was no exception, and the flexibility they enjoyed allowed them to take advantage of the time they had in a way they saw fit. Shane, Misty, and Tommy felt that their cyber charter schools gave them a freedom that they did not find in their public school.

The two students who felt that their cyber-charter school met their needs, Jacob and Tommy, both left their home schools because of psycho-educational issues they were having. Tommy's father and learning coach, Fred, spoke at length about Tommy's ADHD and how he would allow other students to get him into trouble. Tommy himself related that he was not learning anything at his home school because of the distractions from other students. When he started Washington Cyber Charter School, he felt he had found the right school for himself. He thrived in cyber-charter school with the firm support of his learning coach. His father was blunt in his assessment that without cyber-

charter school Tommy would have never graduated from high school: he could not make it in a public school setting.

Jacob was not comfortable around groups of people. While Susan, his learning coach, described Jacob's condition as self-diagnosed, the fact that he believed that his anxiety around other people impeded his ability to function in a public school was enough of a reason for him to pursue cyber-charter school. He had reached the age of 18, and was old enough to choose how to educate himself. The fact that he also chose not to log on regularly or complete his assignments does not alter his perception that cyber-charter school was better for him than public school. Jacob tried public school, and he believed he could not succeed there. The attitudes articulated by Tommy, Fred, and Jacob suggest that cyber-charter school is a sound alternative for some students who struggle with personal issues in public school. The next section will discuss some of the aspects of cyber-charter school that were described negatively by students and their learning coaches.

### **Negative Aspects of Cyber-Charter Schools**

The results of the study also point to some themes that do not reflect positive opinions about cyber-charter schools. As participants in the study related their experiences, there were several aspects of their time in for-profit cyber-charter schools that were described negatively. The negative themes that were most prevalent from descriptions related by students and their learning coaches were: 1) students did not remain enrolled in cyber-charter school for long and returned to their home schools, 2) adequate support in the home is not a guarantee that students will be successful, 3) cyber-charter schools are more difficult academically than public school. This is partly due to

students having to adjust to a new information delivery system, 4) students felt isolated as they worked in their homes, 5) home school cyber programs are better, and finally, 6) very few of the participants would repeat the cyber-charter experience if given the opportunity.

None of the five students involved in the study graduated from their cyber-charter school. Even the two students who felt that the online environment fit them best did not remain enrolled. Jacob dropped out of school altogether, and Tommy quit logging on after he left home. The other three students were enrolled for a short time and then left for different reasons. Shane was arrested and was required to attend high school while he was incarcerated. Upon his release he was required by the judge to return to his home district, which he did. He was placed in an alternative school for the remainder of his senior year and graduated from his home school.

Eve struggled in the online environment due to loneliness and depression. When she completed the school year, she returned to her home school and graduated from there instead. Misty spent the longest time in the for-profit cyber-charter school. She spent her entire sophomore year at her church program whose academic curriculum was provided by Kennedy. She had experience working online because she was enrolled in her home school's cyber program prior to enrolling in her church program. When that school year ended, she returned to her home school cyber program where she felt her needs were being met better than at Kennedy. She graduated from her home school. 80% of the students in the study who left their home school to attend Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Lincoln Cyber Charter School, or Washington Cyber Charter School returned to their home school and graduated. Even Tommy, who quit when he turned 18 and later got

arrested and sent to jail, returned to his home school's cyber program and was able to graduate.

All five students involved in the study believed that they received adequate support in the home, but that support was not enough to ensure success in cyber-charter school. Three of the students, (Misty, Shane, and Eve) had ample support at home and still opted to leave cyber-charter school. Misty was not happy with her church program. She was the oldest student in the program and was often called on to help the younger students. Even though she received help from her learning coach, Amy, and the other volunteers working in the program, after a year Misty was ready to return to her home school's cyber program and the friends she had there. She said she returned to her home school because she wanted to graduate with her friends. Shane really had no choice when he left Lincoln Cyber Charter School. However, both he and his learning coach believed that online education was not working out for him. Even if he had not been arrested, Shane would have returned to his home school or dropped out because he struggled so much in cyber-charter school. Eve made the decision to leave because her social needs were not being met as she worked in the online environment. She became depressed due to lack of interaction with people in general and people of her own age specifically. She returned to the regular education population of her home school and became involved in a vocational program. She made some friends in her new school, and school became less stressful for her. She felt her time in cyber-charter school gave her confidence in her own abilities, but she was glad to get back to public school.

Another theme that kept recurring during interviews with students was they felt cyber-charter school was more academically-difficult than their home schools'

curriculum. Four of the five students interviewed stated that their cyber-charter school assignments were harder than the work they were asked to do in public school. Shane, who was a student with special needs, struggled the most with the cyber environment. His teachers at Lincoln, who knew he was an identified student coming from a special education program, offered him no more support than they did their general-education students. According to Shane, they offered less. Shane was a hands-on learner, and he had real difficulty learning new material from online lessons. His mother and learning coach, Krystal, was worried about this when she enrolled him. She was assured that he would receive one-on-one support from his teachers when he struggled, and evidently, he did at first. Krystal mentioned phone calls Shane got from his teachers and also said a teacher contacted him once via Skype. However, what is undisputed through both Shane's and his mother's testimony, was that Shane was not suited to work in an online program. He needed more individual attention than they could provide.

Misty also struggled in cyber-charter school once she left her home school's cyber program to join her church's school. She felt that the work was harder at Kennedy than she was used to and that she did not receive as much support from her learning coach, Amy, and the church volunteers as she got from her home school's cyber teacher. She failed a biology class at Kennedy that she felt she would have passed in her former school. Jacob also found the work harder at Kennedy than his public school. He wasted time during the day and tried to finish all his work the evening before it was due. This procrastination led to frustration when he realized at 10:00 in the evening that he needed help and his teachers were offline and his learning coach had left for the day. This situation caused him to neglect assignments and ultimately to fail. Even Tommy, who

loved cyber-charter school also believed it was harder than his home school. However, he was able to get support from both his learning coach and his teachers, and he was satisfied with the progress he made.

All five students, with the exception of Misty who had cyber school experience, were asked to adopt a new method to learning that was different for them. While most of their teachers used the same pedagogical methods employed in regular school, the interaction between teachers and students required a fundamental shift in the way they were used to doing things (Cooper-Parham, 2015). This in and of itself was enough to make school work more difficult in the experience of these students.

Another theme that was articulated by the three students who struggled in cyber-charter school was that they felt isolated while they worked at home by themselves or with just family members. Eve struggled the most with this feeling of isolation. Eve's initial experience in her new school was negative, so she opted to enroll in Lincoln Cyber Charter School. Her regular schedule soon began to change. She slept all morning and was forced to work all afternoon and into the evening to complete her work. Because she rarely left her apartment, she was not able to make any connections with people her own age in her new town, and she began to become depressed. It was only after she returned to her home school and made some friends that her depression began to abate. Shane also left his friends behind when he enrolled in cyber-charter school. He no longer felt a part of his school community and began to reach out to students he knew from his earlier time in alternative education. Shane blames his legal troubles on his decision to forsake his friends from his home school for other friends who were involved with illegal behavior. He also said that he felt lonely working at home when all his siblings were at school.

Misty also struggled in her church program. She did not feel the same sense of isolation as Shane and Eve because she was still involved in athletics at her home school.

However, she did not see her friends as much as she did when she was enrolled in her school's cyber program, and that was a hardship for her. She could not wait to go back to her old cyber program.

Not all students are suited to work in isolation (Chi-Yuan & Rueda, 2012; Cooper-Parham, 2015). Some struggle when they go from hundreds of human interactions a day in their public schools to very few in the home environment. Even though all of their cyber-charter schools offered socialization events, these three students chose to not take advantage of them, even though they each admitted they missed the contact with other students.

None of the students in the study remained in their for-profit program for more than a year. Two of them returned to their home school's cyber program and were able to graduate. Misty returned to a program she was familiar with that provided her a level of comfort. Tommy also enrolled in his home school's program once he was released from jail. Both students had positive comments to say about the program and specifically about the teacher. Their home school program required them to come into school once a week to meet with the teacher, review progress on assignments, and ask any questions they may have had. Both Misty and Tommy appreciated the one-on-one assistance they got from the teacher. They both appreciated the opportunity to speak face-to-face with a teacher who helped them understand the work when they struggled. When Shane's little sister also began to have discipline issues after Shane graduated, his mother, Krystal, enrolled her daughter in this same program. After Shane's experience with Lincoln, she

was not willing to enroll her daughter in a program where there was no face-to-face component. Krystal was also very complimentary of the home school cyber program and the teacher. Because of the nature of the big for-profit cyber-charter schools, they do not have the capacity to provide this weekly interaction of teachers and students. From the testimonies of students who took part in their home school's cyber program and their learning coaches, they considered this interaction a definite benefit to them.

One of the most common themes that was discussed in the interviews was that most of the participants and their learning coaches would not repeat the for-profit cyber-charter experience, if given the choice. Tommy and Fred both believed that cyber-charter was the best way to go, and Jacob felt that the online environment worked well for him, even though he had no success. However, the remaining participants all felt unequivocally that their decision to enroll in a for-profit cyber-charter school was a bad one. Even though four of the five students made progress in the online environment, they felt they were better served in the public school.

The results of the study indicate that 30% of the participants believe that their academic, social, and emotional needs were met in cyber-charter school. The remaining 70% reported that theirs were not for a variety of reasons. Participants described both positive and negative aspects of their cyber-charter school experiences. The positive aspects revealed the following data: 1) 100% of students involved in the study believed they received adequate support from home, 2) 60% of students enjoyed the flexibility cyber-charter school provided, 3) 40% of students took advantage of social opportunities offered by their cyber-charter school, 4) 40% of students reported they were physically uncomfortable in public school and cyber-charter best met their needs.

Participants also described the negative aspects of being a cyber-charter student: All of the students in the study left their cyber-charter schools prior to graduation. Four of the students returned to their home school and graduated from there. Four students believed that cyber-charter school was more difficult than their home school, and three students reported a sense of isolation as they worked in the online environment. Finally, seven of the ten participants, students and learning coaches, reported they would not repeat the experience of cyber-charter school if they had to make the decision over again. The average enrollment period for all students involved in the study was 7.2 months.

### **Implications of the Results**

Much of the research on student achievement in cyber-charter schools compares cyber-charter students to their age appropriate peers in traditional schools (Anthony, 2015; Carr-Chelman & Marsh, 2009; Cooper-Parham, 2015; CREDO, 2015; Herold, 2015). However, the rapid growth of online programs has far outpaced research into their effectiveness (Barkovich, 2014; Cavanaugh, 2009). More recent studies have shown poorer growth of students who are economically disadvantaged (CREDO, 2015), but very few have concentrated on the experiences of the students themselves and their learning coaches as they navigate their way through the trials and tribulations of attending a for-profit cyber-charter school. This study concentrated on this population in an effort to determine their perceptions of their lived experiences and whether or not they felt their needs were met in cyber-charter school.

The research in this study suggests that students in cyber-charter schools needed strong support from their homes. Both Hendricsen (2014) and Figueiredo-Brown, (2013) maintained that students without this support from their homes are less likely to be

successful. The three students who achieved the most success during their time in cyber-charter school enjoyed the support of one of their parents, who acted as learning coach or another member of their family who was willing to help them.

Tommy was successful because his father re-explained his work and adapted the information for him and insisted that he spend the time to complete it. He also held his son accountable for completing the work. While Krystal was not much help to her son, she was instrumental in getting his sister, who could help him, to spend the one-on-one time he needed to understand concepts. Shane struggled in the cyber environment, but with his sister's help he was able to pass his classes. Eve's mother, Mary, became her partner in the cyber-charter school environment. Eve also received help from her sister in college and Mary's boyfriend when neither of them understood directions or the concepts. Conversely, Jacob only had the support of his learning coach for a short time each day. He was not held accountable all the time because of the other professional commitments of his learning coach. As a result, Jacob struggled because without someone reminding him and pressing him to complete his work, he found it easy to ignore it and to make other choices. Without this constant support, he dropped out of high school. Misty also had a learning coach who was not related to her. While Misty passed all of her classes except biology, and had the help of the church volunteers, she felt her biggest supporter was her grandfather, who was one of the volunteers. She said he was a "math genius" and helped her with her algebra. These perceptions of students imply that having help in the home is critical, but having the support of loved ones is more beneficial than support from strangers or acquaintances. Cyber-charter schools provide teachers who run classes but many of the responsibilities that would fall on a teacher in a

traditional school become the responsibility of the learning coach. This is not made clear in advertising done by cyber-charter schools.

While not all students or learning coaches were satisfied with the support they received from their cyber-charter schools, the lack of support did not prove to be an insurmountable hurdle for students to achieve success. All of the students except Jacob achieved some level of success as measured by course completion and passing grades. Even though Shane struggled in Lincoln Cyber Charter School and felt completely unsupported, he managed to pass his classes with the help of his sister. Misty had difficulty getting in contact with her teachers at Kennedy Cyber School, but other than her biology class, she was able to access the help she needed from her learning coach, her grandfather, and the volunteers from her church. Four of the five student/ learning coach pairs reported experiencing technical difficulties while interacting with their cyber-charter school. While these interruptions were annoyances, they did not truly impede any of the students enough to influence their final achievement levels. The results of the study suggest that support from school is not as critical as support in the home.

Both Jacob and Tommy left their home school because they said they did not “fit in.” Both of them wanted to get away from the students and issues that they faced in public school. Tommy had real trouble dealing with distractions he faced in the public school. Other students took advantage of him, which caused him to get in trouble in school and impeded his ability to learn. Jacob also struggled with personal issues in public school. He felt anxious when faced with crowds of people and was not able to function in classrooms and hallways filled with people. His anxiety impeded his learning. Both Jacob and Tommy felt as if cyber-charter school was the perfect solution.

Niederberger (2012) contended that cyber charter schools work well for students who cannot be successful in public school. Tommy and Jacob are proof of this statement. Having gone through the program, both were more comfortable working in an isolated environment away from the pressures of their home school. Both Jacob and Tommy took advantage of the social opportunities provided by their cyber-charter schools, but they did it on their own terms. Jacob spent time in Kennedy's chat room and Tommy and his dad attended several Washington Cyber Charter School outings. Both loved the cyber environment because they felt it met their needs. Their attitudes imply that students who have difficulty learning in public school are more likely to feel comfortable in the cyber environment than students who leave their public schools because of attendance or discipline issues.

Not all students are suited to work in the online environment (Figueiredo-Brown, 2013). One of the criticisms of cyber-charter schools is that their students often work alone and forego the day-to-day physical interactions with their teachers and other students (Chi-Yuan & Reda, 2012; Cooper-Parham, 2015). Three of the students in the study stated that they missed interacting with their peers. Eve became depressed, which caused her to sleep all morning and do her work in the evenings. The sense of isolation she encountered took a toll on her ability to function and complete her assignments. She was able to pass her classes, but she believed the situation was not ideal. She was happy to return to her home school after six months in cyber-charter school even though she had been the victim of bullying when she last attended. When she returned to her home school, she entered a vocational program and made some friends. The bullying stopped, and she began to enjoy school. Shane missed his friends when he left public school. He

stopped “hanging out” with his buddies from school and spent most of his time in his house. When he became lonely, he began to spend time with some new friends. Together, they made some bad decisions which resulted in Shane being incarcerated. He left Lincoln Cyber Charter School when he entered jail. Even if he had not been arrested and sentenced, Shane had had enough of cyber-charter school and was anxious to return to his home school. Upon his release he was required to attend an alternative education program that offered him the one-on-one help he needed. He did the work required during his senior year, including summer school and graduated with his class. While Misty did not have the same sense of isolation as Eve and Shane, she still missed her friends. She had grown tired of her church program because she was the oldest student and had no age-appropriate peers. She also struggled working without having face-to-face access to a teacher. After a full year in her church program, she returned to her home school’s cyber program so she could have the support of a live teacher and graduate with her friends. This sense of isolation and loneliness can be a real impediment to students who need social interaction. Students who desire to leave public school for cyber-charter school need to be aware of how their social life can be impacted.

Using only the students in the study to determine the longevity of enrollment in for-profit cyber-charter school implies that students do not remain in their for-profit schools for long. Of the five students studied, Misty stayed the longest. She spent her entire sophomore year in her church program. Shane spent from October to February of his junior year at Lincoln. Jacob enrolled in Kennedy in January, and by May, he had been dropped from his independent living program because he was making no progress in school. He dropped out of Kennedy as soon as he lost his place in the apartment. Eve

enrolled in Lincoln Cyber Charter School in December of her junior year. She remained enrolled to the end of that academic year in June and re-enrolled in her home school.

Tommy enrolled in Washington Cyber Charter School during his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year. He remained enrolled until his eighteenth birthday, 10 months later. These short attendance periods mean that the average time spent in for-profit cyber-charter school for these five students was 7.2 months. While not all cyber students can be expected to have as brief an enrollment period as the five students studied, the fact that none of these students stayed long or graduated from their cyber-charter school implies that some proportion of students do not remain long or succeed in the for-profit online environment.

It is important to note that four of the five students involved in the study returned to their home schools and graduated. When cyber-charter school does not produce the desired effects, students face a choice of enrolling in a different cyber-charter school, returning to their home school, or dropping out. Shane, Tommy, Misty, and Eve chose to return. Jacob chose to drop out of school entirely. While Shane and Eve returned to the classroom and graduated, Misty and Tommy went into their home school's cyber program and graduated. They were happy with their choices. They both liked the once-a-week interaction with their teacher, who they both liked very much. The large for-profit cyber-charter schools do not have the capacity to provide this weekly personal support because their students are spread all over the state. Both Tommy and Misty commented on how effective their home school cyber teacher was. The implication is that the relationship with the teacher matters to the student, and face-to-face interaction, even once a week, can make the difference between success and failure.

The major focus of the study was to determine whether students and their learning coaches felt they were well served by their for-profit cyber-charter schools. Their experiences as they worked in the online environment shaped that final opinion. Each of the participants was asked if they would repeat their for-profit cyber-charter experience if given the opportunity. Four of the five learning coaches and three of the students stated they would not. Only Jacob and Tommy reported that they would go back to their cyber-charter school, and Tommy preferred his home school program to Washington Cyber Charter School. Of the learning coaches, only Fred felt that cyber-charter school was a better option for his son. The other four learning coaches all believed that public school was preferable to cyber-charter school. Seventy percent of the study population stated that their cyber-charter school did not meet their needs. This shared perception implies that for the majority of these students who are economically disadvantaged and left their home school to enroll in cyber-charter school, this choice was not a productive one. While the circumstances and the reasons vary, the level of dissatisfaction seems to suggest that cyber-charter school is not for everyone. The study results also imply that students who leave public school because of issues with teachers or other students are less likely to be successful than students who leave because they are physically struggling in the public school environment.

The results of this study based on the experiences of five students and their learning coaches implies that support from home is critical for student success in cyber-charter school. Support from family members or loved ones is more effective than support from social agents or acquaintances according to the study. Support from home was found to be more important than support from school. The results of the study also

imply that not all students are suited to work in the online environment. Students in the study reported a sense of isolation as they worked in their cyber-charter schools. Students in the study also had difficulty adapting to a new platform of learning. Finally, the study implies that students who are not capable of functioning in a public school environment may feel more comfortable and be better served in a cyber-charter program.

### **Findings Linked to Ethical Framework**

The findings from this study are aligned with a theoretical framework of Shapiro and Stefkovich, (2016). In their book, *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education*, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) provided a theoretical framework for examining decisions made by school leaders through the lens of what they termed the *ethics of the profession*. They believed that school leaders should use the Multiple Paradigm Approach to make ethical decisions. This approach combines the ethics of justice, critique, and care with the ethics of a new paradigm, the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The ethic of justice is characterized by faith in the law and hope for progress. This ethic is a commitment to human freedom. The ethic of critique challenges the status quo. The ethic of critique is aimed at awakening educators to inequities in society, as well as in schools. This ethic focuses on not blindly accepting the ethics of those in power, but instead looking through the eyes of the downtrodden before making decisions (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The ethic of care emphasizes social responsibility and works to avoid injustices (Noddings, 1992). The focus of this ethical framework is that students are at the center of the educational process. These students need nurturing and encouragement to reach their full potential. The ethic of care requires educators to listen to the “other

voices” before they make a decision that will have a direct impact upon them (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The ethic of the profession combines each of these three ethics into a new focus on what is in the best interest of the child. Using the Multiple Paradigm Approach to moral and ethical issues allows decision-makers to view the issue facing them from multiple viewpoints and allows them to make truly ethical decisions.

The results of this study suggested that students who enrolled in a for-profit cyber-charter school required strong support from their home in order to be successful. The results also indicated that not all students are well-suited to work in the online environment. More than half the students involved in the study felt that the for-profit online environment did not work for them. When they decided to pursue cyber-charter school, all of the participants sought information and were actively recruited by their cyber-charter school. However, there was no type of screening done by Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Lincoln Cyber Charter School, or Washington Cyber Charter School on any of the students or their parents to determine their suitability for the program or to communicate to them the type of issues that some students had historically encountered. None of the students involved in the study were enrolled in their respective cyber-charter schools for longer than a year.

The Multiple Paradigm Approach advocates for the leaders of all of the cyber-charter schools in Pennsylvania to look through the lens of the ethic of the profession and reflect on why students come and go from their programs. Are there changes they can make to help mitigate this issue? How can they further support these students? Should they institute some type of screening process to educate prospective student recruits and

their parents/learning coaches about the realities of working in the online environment and what it takes to be successful?

The answer to these questions is likely the way forward for for-profit cyber-charter schools. It will mean forgoing some income, but these efforts are truly in the best interests of their students. Strike, Haller, and Soltis (1998) spoke to this ethic, “We cannot treat people as though they were things, mere objects, who are valued only insofar as they contribute to our welfare” (p. 39). Perhaps by learning from the perceptions of their customers, cyber-charter schools can examine their business model to determine if it is possible to adapt their programs in order to better satisfy their customers. If students and learning coaches are happy, they will likely remain enrolled.

Another ethical concern centers around a single student and a single cyber-charter school. Shane was a student with special needs who enrolled in Lincoln Cyber Charter School. As a student with special needs, he was entitled to specially-designed instruction and accommodations that he and his mother said he never received. Shane said he was treated like every other student and was required to complete the same work in the same timeframe. This issue became an ethical and legal one because Shane did not receive a free and appropriate public education from his cyber-charter school. This lack of special education support was certainly not in Shane’s best interest. Another ethical concern in this situation that did not directly impact Shane was that Lincoln Cyber Charter School, like Kennedy Cyber Charter School and Washington Cyber Charter School, charge school districts a much higher rate for students with special needs. Shane contends his cyber-charter school charged his home district for services it did not provide. Lincoln

should also examine its procedures for meeting the Individualized Education Plans of students with special needs as well.

The study participants also reported on what they saw as positive aspects of cyber-charter school. Jacob, Tommy, and Eve mentioned that they felt that their teachers cared about them. Their teachers demonstrated that care through telephone calls and e-mail follow-ups to check on their progress and well-being. Tommy felt that his teachers went out of their way to help him when he struggled. He talked about being brought into a private chat room where he could interact with the teacher one-on-one and get things explained to him. All the students except Misty felt that their work was graded quickly and feedback was provided regularly. All of these actions can be seen as truly in the best interests of students.

### **Recommendations for Cyber-Charter Schools**

Several of the participants made suggestions about adjustments that would have improved their cyber-charter experience. These “other voices” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) should be heard by decision makers if they want to make ethical decisions regarding their cyber-charter programs. The most common suggestion was for each cyber-charter school to have a local location that students could visit to get face-to-face help from a teacher if they needed it. By rotating the center on a day-to-day basis, cyber-charters could cover large areas and provide more personal teacher support. This model worked well for Misty and Tommy, who both left their cyber-charter schools to enroll in their home school cyber program, which mandated this contact. They both commented on how much this helped them and both really appreciated the relationship they developed with the teacher. All three of the large for-profit cyber-charter schools have a walk-in

help center, but it is far away from the homes of these five students, which made it difficult to access.

Another suggestion was for the social opportunities offered by the cyber-charter schools to be held more often and to be held in a more local venue, rather than requiring students and their learning coaches to travel great distances to interact with other cyber students. The sentiments of two students and a learning coach were that if the outings were more local, the crowd would be smaller, but the chance that student interaction would be sustained after the event were greater. This small improvement could positively impact the student's experiences (Chi-Yuan & Rueda, 2012; Cooper-Parham, 2015). These were student and learning coach suggestions that were made to improve the experiences of students in the online environment. The researcher would add a third.

The results of this study indicate that at least three students examined in this study felt they were not suited to work in the online environment which, according to Barbour (2006), requires a highly-motivated, self-directed, self-disciplined, and an independent learner who can read and write well and who also has a strong familiarity with technology. Cyber-charters should become more rigorous in screening potential students for aptitude and potential for success. Potential students and their parents should be offered a realistic view of what expectations will be for both student and learning coach. Special education teachers or administrators must determine how students with special needs will be accommodated. The Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) requires that students with disabilities are offered a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. IDEA mandates specialized instruction and related services for disabled students, if required (United States Department of Education, 2018). Inasmuch

as cyber-charter schools are public schools, they must also follow the IDEA mandates. Also, students and learning coaches should be cautioned about the possible effects of working in an isolated environment. Perhaps by educating people about the demands of cyber-charter school before enrollment, schools can help families understand if cyber-charter is a match for their situation. This extra effort might result in a loss of customers for the cyber-charters, but it has the potential to limit the coming and going of students a short time after enrollment. This quick turnover of students is what Saul (2011) labels the churn rate. By making changes designed to limit the churn rate, the Chief Executives of Kennedy Cyber Charter School, Lincoln Cyber Charter School, and Washington Cyber Charter School will be working in the best interests of the students they serve. Over time, this approach should make their businesses more profitable because of returning customers. By following these three suggestions cyber-charter schools could increase their students' ability to interact with teachers and other students while also educating families who might not be suited for the program. According to this study, offering these three types of support could have made a difference for some of the students involved.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

One of the major concerns about for-profit cyber-charter schools is the constant cycle of enrollment and withdrawal of students in and out of the program (DeJarnatt, 2013; Saul, 2011). Research needs to be done to determine the percentage of students who enrolled in a for-profit cyber-charter school and left within one year. This research should also determine their reasons for leaving. Due to FERPA regulations, cyber-charter schools cannot divulge this information, which would make data gathering problematic. However, a study of the churn rate has the potential to identify common causes for

students leaving that could then be addressed by either the cyber-charter school or the home school.

Another recommendation for further study would be to examine the efficacy of home school cyber programs. Many school districts have developed their own cyber programs in an effort to keep students from leaving to attend a for-profit cyber-charter school (Davis, 2014; Niederberger, 2012). A potential study could examine the perspectives of students and parents to determine whether enrolling in their home school cyber program met their needs. Another consideration worthy of study is how having face-to-face access with a teacher on a regular basis affects student satisfaction with the program.

Finally, another subject that needs to be investigated is how students with special needs are accommodated in the for-profit cyber-charter schools. It is important to research how students with special needs are treated in the online environment and if they are receiving the due process and specially designed instruction the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires all schools to provide. Inasmuch as cyber-charters charge a much higher rate for these students, it is imperative from the home school's perspective to ensure that the fees they are paying are being used to educate their students.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the experiences of five students and their learning coaches as they navigated together through their enrollment in a for-profit cyber-charter school. Most of them achieved success in this environment, but none of them stayed. Their reasons for leaving were different, but the results of the study point to several recurring

themes. Cyber-charter school is not for everyone. All of the participants in the study except one mentioned that self-motivation was critical for success. Student comments suggested that support in the home from family is also critical, even more so than support from school. However, working in the online environment can be isolating, and some students missed interacting with other students their own age. Cyber-charter school also requires students to make adjustments to the way they learn to adapt to the new environment. Cyber-charter schools also have limited capacity for emotional support (CREDO, 2015) so students must work through personal issues at home.

This study examined five students who were economically disadvantaged and their learning coaches from a single district in Pennsylvania, so the results cannot be extrapolated to all cyber-students in the state. However, there is valuable insight to be learned from the experiences of these participants. For-profit cyber-charter schools can do more to screen their potential students to determine suitability for the program and ensure they have proper support at home. They can be more forthcoming in their recruitment efforts and describe student issues that historically have led to lack of success in the program. They can provide satellite offices where local students can go to get help if needed. For-profit cyber-charter schools do well by offering social opportunities, but they could hold them more frequently for smaller local groups.

The hurdles are not insurmountable. These large for-profit cyber-charter schools are here to stay. They do serve many of their students very well and many students graduate from their programs. When for-profit cyber-charter schools examine their practices through the lens of the ethic of the profession, they will be able to find ways to mitigate the negative experiences that were encountered by the subjects of this study. By

examining their current practices and the perceptions of their clients, students and learning coaches, for-profit cyber-charter schools will be able to serve the best interests of their students.

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## Appendix A

### Student Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me the history of your involvement in cyber-charter school?
  - a. How long did/have you attended cyber-charter school?
  - b. What grade were you in when you entered? Currently? When you left?
2. Who at home prompts/prompted you to do school work?
  - a. How do/did you react to the prompting?
  - b. Are/were you always in agreement about the time you spend working on school assignments?
3. Why did you leave public school?
  - a. Was it a school issue?
  - b. Was it a personal issue?
4. Why did you choose a cyber-charter school?
  - a. What had you heard about cyber-charter school?
  - b. Was it your choice?
  - c. Was it your parent/ caregiver's choice?
5. Having spent time in the program, what are your impressions about the differences between cyber-charter school and your home school?
  - a. What do you miss from your old school?
  - b. What do you not miss about your old school?

6. Do you find the assigned work at cyber-charter school easier or more challenging than your old school? Why?
  - a. How are/ were your grades in cyber-charter school?
  - b. How do/did you progress in terms of completing courses?
  - c. Are you making more or less progress than you did in your old school
7. Tell me about a typical school day in cyber-charter school.
8. Are there any aspects about being a cyber-charter student that you didn't expect?
9. Do/Did you log on every day? If you don't/ didn't, what kinds of things keep/kept you from doing schoolwork?
10. What kind of help do/did you receive from people in your home? Please elaborate:
  - a. Who reminds/reminded you to log on and do school work?
  - b. Who can/did help you when you don't/didn't understand your teachers?
11. When you don't/didn't understand something from the online lesson you are working on, how do/did you get help from your teacher?
12. How do/did your parents'/guardians' feel about your involvement in cyber-charter school?
  - a. If they could do it over, would they?
  - b. Do/Did they feel that your needs are/were being met in your current cyber-charter school?
13. How often do/did you get feedback from your teachers? What form does/did it come in?

- a. How quickly are/were assignments graded?
  - b. Are/Were your grades kept up to date?
  - c. How do/did you access your grades?
14. Did you graduate from cyber-charter school?
15. How do you feel your decision to leave public school for a cyber-charter school impacted your ability to graduate high school?
16. Was cyber-charter school a better fit for you than your old school in terms of how you work and learn?
- a. Do you feel you've been successful in cyber-charter school?
  - b. If you could do it all over again, would you make the same choice?
17. What type of person is most likely to be successful in cyber-charter school?
18. What type of person will struggle in cyber-charter school?

## Appendix B

### Learning Coach Interview Protocol

1. Why did you initially decide to enroll your child in a cyber-charter school?
2. What did you know about online education before you enrolled in a cyber-charter school?
  - a. Describe why you felt your child would benefit from this program
  - b. What did you think would be required of your child by the cyber-charter school?
  - c. What made you think your child was suited to work in an online environment?
3. In your initial contacts, how did the cyber-charter school describe your role as a parent/caregiver?
4. What was your experience as the in-home resource person for your student?
  - a. Describe your student's work habits
  - b. Describe any conflicts that revolved around time spent working on lessons?
  - c. How did your relationship with your student evolve as a result of this interaction?
5. Did your child find the work easier or harder than his/her home school? Why?
6. Describe the work your student was asked to do.
7. How was your child taught online?
8. How did your child do in cyber-charter school?
  - a. How were his/her grades?
  - b. Did he/she pass all the classes he/she signed up for?

- c. Do you feel that our son/daughter was capable of doing the assigned work? Why or why not?
  - d. Why do you think your child succeeded or failed?
- 9. Tell me about a typical day at cyber-charter school.
  - a. How long did your child spend connected to his/her school each day?
- 10. How did your child get help when he/she struggled?
  - a. Describe the help he/she got in your home.
  - b. How do his/her teachers help?
  - c. How did he contact teachers to ask for help?
- 11. How did the cyber-charter school make you aware if your child was struggling?
- 12. What kind of things got in the way of your child's logging on to cyber-charter school?
- 13. How is your relationship with the cyber-charter school?
- 14. How do you feel the education your child received in cyber-charter school compares to the one he/she would have received if he/she had remained in public school?
- 15. What kind of opportunities for socialization were available for your son/daughter?
- 16. What kind of student would be successful in cyber-charter school?
- 17. What kind of student would struggle in cyber-charter school?
- 18. If you had to do it all over again, would you make the same choice? Why or why not?