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Ohio cyber school wins over critics

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Columbus - As fast as the click of a mouse, Bill Lager has gone from heretic to hero.

The founder of the state's first and largest electronic cyber school once drew the ire of traditional public school administrators, who complained that he was stealing their students - and the state funding that followed them - by the thousands.

Now, those same critics are turning to the 57-year-old businessman for help in dealing with the challenges and costs of meeting the needs of hard-to-educate youngsters.

It's an irony not lost on the tough kid who grew up in the hardscrabble Columbus neighborhood known as The Bottoms.

"We have got to quit fighting about the wrong things in education," Lager said. "Kids are not going to show up because we build them a brand-new building. But every kid in Ohio is a password away from taking part in a robust digital academy."

With evangelical intensity, Lager is trying to make that happen. In 2000, Lager's firm, Altair Learning Management of Columbus, founded the state's first cyber school, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow.



The publicly funded, nonprofit charter school - which in turn hired Lager's for-profit Altair to run it - holds all classes on an electronic intranet system.

Within a year, ECOT, which now has 7,600 pupils statewide, became the first electronic school in the nation to graduate students from high school.

But Lager sees electronic charter schools as only the first step in his digital revolution. At the American Association of School Administrators conference in New Orleans last month, Altair launched the IQity Learning Suite. This "cyber school in a box" electronically reproduces the school experience for teachers and students, doing everything but place an apple on the teacher's desk.

Lager sees IQity leading to one "blended" public school system in which students will take a couple of classes online at home to complement traditional classroom instruction.

In his vision, charter schools such as ECOT would disappear because their services would, in effect, be offered in regular public schools.

Education pioneer survived bankruptcy

In many ways, Lager is an unlikely warrior in the digital revolution.

At 23, he started Office Works, an office supply, furniture and printing company that became one of Central Ohio's largest and most successful firms.

The boom years ended in 1982 when the company, plagued by an inflation-ravaged economy and a too-ambitious growth plan, went bankrupt.

As Lager went on to other ventures, his vision for an online school was born out of tragedy. A stepdaughter, Bethany, was in and out of hospitals with juvenile diabetes. Lager found that traditional schools could not - or would not - meet her needs. While Lager struggled to afford costly private schools, he wondered what choices parents with fewer resources had.

A decade after Bethany's death, ECOT was the largest school in Ohio.

Today, the number of electronic schools in Ohio has exploded. The state now has approximately 40 such schools serving about 20,000 students. Some are youngsters who struggled in traditional bricks-and-mortar schools. Three-quarters of ECOT's students qualify for free or reduced lunches under federal guidelines. Some have unique situations.

ECOT's youngsters, for example, include a 14-year-old country-and-western singer, the son of a Cincinnati Reds ballplayer, the child of a movie star, and 12 terminally ill children.

Last year, ECOT jumped two rankings on the state's academic achievement ladder and more than tripled its two-year goal of increasing its performance index 10 points. The index measures the performance of every student tested.

Software replaces bricks and mortar

Lager's success probably will be measured by the popularity of IQity, which he bills as the first online learning system built exclusively for high schools.

The system delivers interactive, one-on-one learning in an online suite of "rooms" which are virtual replicas of a school's structure. They include

a homeroom where students check in, a teachers' lounge where instructors can swap tips and strategies, and a science lab where students can splash chemicals without endangering their eyes.

Every student's mouse click, e-mail or upload is documented. The system also features class.com, a well-regarded online curriculum to which IQity has exclusive Ohio rights. All lessons, quizzes and exams are aligned with Ohio's academic standards.

The system features an Ohio Graduation Test practice test and study guide that can be tailored for high-stakes exams in other states.

At least 80 public school districts in Ohio this year used a free trial of the Ohio Graduation Test study product, and many are considering purchasing IQity next year and offering online classes. Three juvenile court systems in the state are also committed to the product to provide a monitored, controlled education for youngsters expelled from their home school districts.

"It's the wave of the future," said William Graham, the e-learning coordinator for the Sandy Valley Local School District in Stark County, which used IQity's test study product this year. "We've had a lot of success with our kids taking online classes. Our goal is to blend that with the bricks-and-mortar classes."

If that sounds a lot like Lager's vision, it might be because he's no longer talking to himself. Michigan just announced plans to require that all public school students take at least one class online. Altair is in discussion with five other states and the Ukraine about putting IQity into their public schools. In all, Lager expects at least 100,000 students to use the product this fall.



"The kids are not afraid of technology," Lager said. "They're demanding what we're doing here."