

SERVING THE COMMUNITIES OF SOUTHERN SCHUYLKILL COUNTY WEEKLY

South Schuylkill News

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RICHARD
HOFFMAN
Pine Grove
Thank You

Inside
this week

Life

FREEZING FOR
A REASON



A chilly Leap in the Lake
helps grant girl's Disney
World wish. B1

PA Farm Show

THE SHOW GROWS
ON IN HARRISBURG



There's plenty new at
this celebration of ag-
riculture, which starts
Saturday, Jan. 7. B8

Quotable

RUDLOFF RETURNS
TO COUNCIL SEAT

"Police coverage is criti-
cal to the community."
— Michele Rudloff, Or-
wigsburg councilwom-
an. A3

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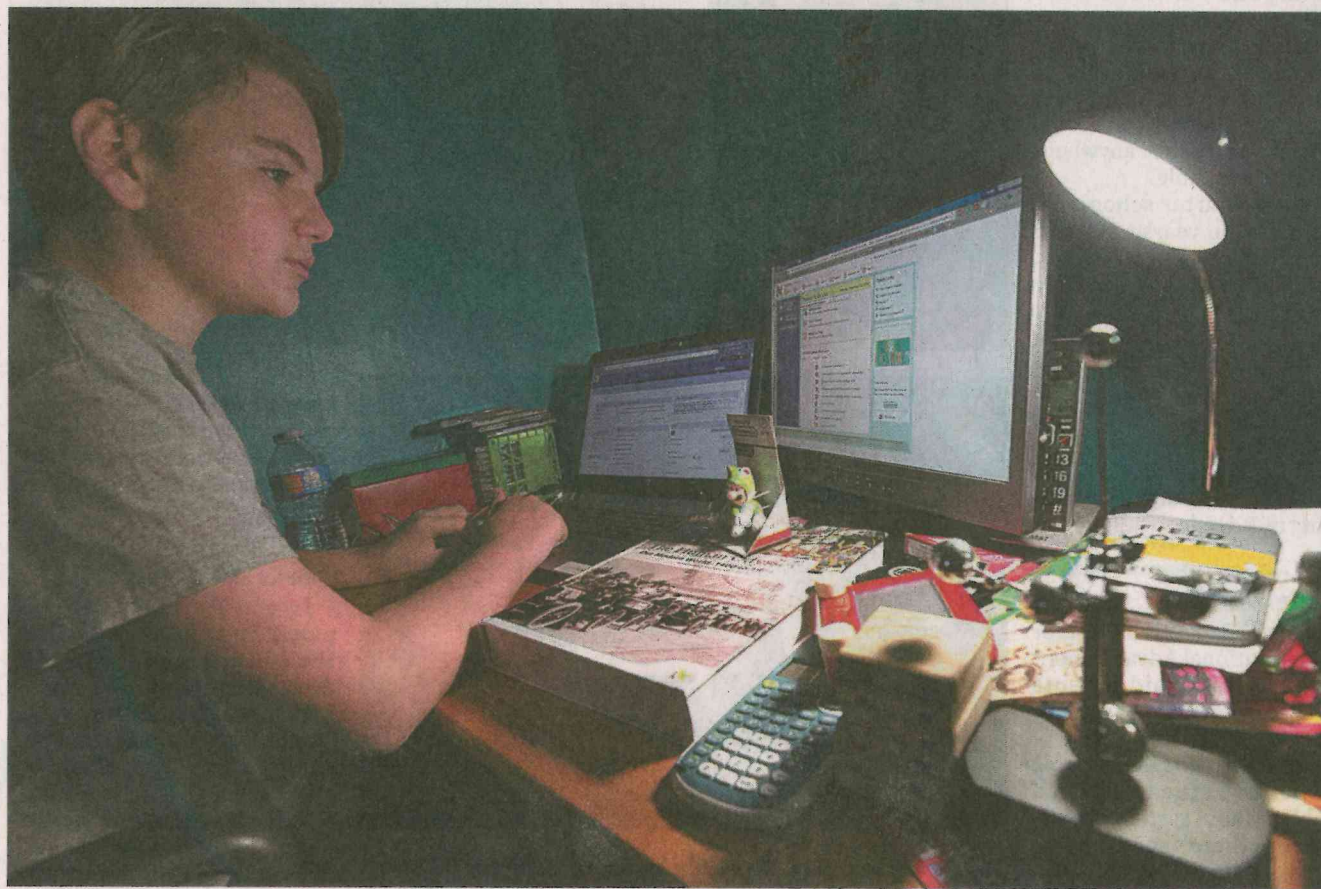
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An educational alternative



Jacob Sachleben, 14, works on a school assignment at his computer inside his Girardville home. Jacob is a student enrolled as a student at Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School, attending cyberschool classes since kindergarten.

Cyber-charter schools are growing in popularity across the state

BY MICHAEL
REGENSBURGER
SOUTH SCHUYLKILL NEWS
CORRESPONDENT

It's 7 a.m. on a Monday morning. In many homes, that is roughly the time when families are rushing to get children up, dressed, fed and to the bus stop for school. But in other households with children, like that of Brenda

Sachleben of Girardville and Nikki Hinkle of York County, the school day presents a bit different routine.

The Sachleben and Hinkle families are part of a growing contingent of families exploring a virtual, computerized way of educating their children known as cyberschooling.

Pennsylvania is among 15 states with cyber-charter schools as an option to par-

ents who want to educate their children outside of the traditional brick and mortar school setting but do not want to take the full home-school route.

In home schooling, education is primarily facilitated by the parent or a tutor. But in a cyber-charter school setting, children log into virtual classrooms on laptop computers provided by the school

and taught by certified teachers. Students interact with other students from all over the state in the same virtual classrooms.

What is a charter school?

To understand why a parent would choose a cyber-charter school over a traditional school, one must first look at what a charter school is.

[See *Cyber* >>> A2]

WAYNE TOWNSHIP

Farmer seeks relief from stormwater management rule

BY COLLEEN HOPTAK
SOUTH SCHUYLKILL NEWS

The Wayne Township supervisors will work with the township planning commission to devise an amendment to the stormwater management plan that is fair to both farmers and residential developers.

During the Dec. 21 meeting, Schwartz Valley resident Laban Riffey asked the supervisors how he could obtain a zoning permit to construct a high tunnel, a structure used to protect plants and prolong the growing season, on his property without having to complete a stormwater management plan.

"My impression is that you aren't opposed to me installing the high tunnel but how can I obtain the permit without incurring the expense of

a water management plan?" Riffey asked.

Is plan required?

When Riffey addressed the issue during the November meeting, the board noted Riffey might be exempt from filing a stormwater management plan under the township's large-lot provision. However, Riffey said that although his total property is larger than the 10-acre minimum requirement, it is on three separate parcels.

"Do I have to consolidate the three parcels into one?" Riffey asked, adding that even if that is done, he still might have to file a stormwater management plan since the square footage that will be covered by the high tunnel exceeds the 5,000-square-foot minimum.

Township Chairman Stan-

ley Fidler did not know why Riffey needs a zoning permit for the structure since he's not disturbing the ground.

"This is just a temporary structure that covers the plants," Fidler said.

Supervisor Charles Ferguson responded the stormwater management plan is required since the structure is covering the ground.

"You have the issue of water runoff," Ferguson said.

"What's the difference between this and setting up a tent?" Earl Otto, township resident and planning commission member, asked. "You're making this guy jump through hoops to put up a hoop. This is not a big issue. It's only a temporary structure."

Riffey asked his neighbors if they would be opposed to him setting up the high tunnels and they said they had no

problems with his proposal.

"The neighbors are upslope from me so they wouldn't be getting large amounts of water runoff," he said.

Requirement or hardship?

Solicitor David Rattigan said Riffey could apply for a variance to set up the high tunnel, but zoning officer Randy Moyer questioned whether he could issue the zoning ordinance without the stormwater management plan since it is an ordinance requirement.

"This issue should be addressed since high tunnels are not mentioned anywhere in the zoning ordinance and there may be more residents who want to put them up in the future," he said. "We're not the first township to struggle with this issue."

[See *Farmer* >>> A4]

SCHUYLKILL HAVEN

Borough tax rate will not change

BY LISA PASCUZZO
SOUTH SCHUYLKILL NEWS
CORRESPONDENT

Schuylkill Haven Borough Council undertook a light agenda Dec. 21 and passed a tax ordinance that keeps the millage unchanged at 4.75 mills for every \$1,000 in assessed property value.

Council adopted its final budget Dec. 7 noting the roughly \$14.05 million budget is \$740,570 less than last year's budget of nearly \$14.8 million.

A 2 percent salary increase was approved for borough administrative employees in 2017.

Treasurer Gloria Ebling reported on November financial matters, which included \$75,384 earned income tax; \$11,835 in local services tax; and \$1,406 in real estate tax. November expenses were \$1,832,616 and year-to-date, \$13,802,524. November revenue was \$1,250,722 and year-to-date, \$14,162,306. Additionally, year-to-date interest revenue is \$8,126.

An earlier executive session to discuss personnel resulted in a decision to allow borough manager Scott Graver to begin advertising to hire a full-time recreation staff position.

A request from Ashley Farr to schedule the Halloween parade date on Oct. 24, with a rain date of Oct. 29, was approved.

Secretary Kathy Killian reported on deposits to capital reserve funds in the amounts of \$16,053 to electric capital reserve; \$17,793 to water; \$16,250 to sewer capital reserve; \$47,845 transferred from electric capital reserve fund to pay for substation expansion project; and \$10,432 transferred from water capital reserve for the Dewey and Parkway project. A \$500,000 bond payment was made Nov. 15.

South Schuylkill Council of Governments funds of \$6,000 for 2016 were received and deposited, and TB Landscaping was paid \$5,531 for services at the Island and Bubeck parks.

Contact Lisa Pascuzzo: 570-385-7358 or news@southschuylkillnews.com.

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[From A1 >>>]

Charter schools are publicly funded schools run without some of the regular rules of district schools in terms of staffing, curriculum choices and budget management and are responsible for following the promises made in their charters. The schools are generally chartered by local school districts and offer educational approaches that are often innovative and unique. As public schools, they have open enrollment, are tuition-free and participate in state testing and federal accountability programs.

Cyber charter schools follow these criteria, as well, but offer studies in an online environment students can access from their homes or anywhere Wi-Fi is available.

Cyber charter schools began about 16 years ago when the internet was fast becoming a household necessity. In Pennsylvania, 16 cyber charter schools are available, one of which is Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School, where Sachleben and Hinkle's children attend.

PAVCS was founded in June 2001 and is headquartered in King of Prussia.

Why choose cyber charter school?

PAVCS Executive Director of Institutional Advancement Jason Billups said parents choose cyber charter schools for a variety of reasons.

"A family chooses an alternative to the traditional public school system usually because there's some type of need or something missing in regards to their child's education," Billups said.

Some of the reasons Billups cited were safety, bullying issues and schedule flexibility.

"We've had Olympic figure skaters and students who were on the motocross circuit," Billups said.

But overall, Billups said parents of cyberschool students usually identify some "underlying need the family feels is missing from the traditional setting that motivates them to choose another model of education."

For Hinkle, it was a special need of her second daughter that introduced her to cyber schools. When she told a friend about some challenges her daughter was having, the friend suggested cyberschooling.

"She attended public school until the second grade, and it just was not working for her," Hinkle said. "They told me she couldn't do anything by herself in class. They didn't seem to know what to do to help her. Their answer was to keep her an hour after school. We just felt there was a bigger problem. She cried every morning at the bus stop and would throw up. She said she was stupid and being bullied. We ended up finding PAVCS, and they helped us find she was dyslexic, had anxiety disorder and ADHD."

Now, Hinkle, who has five children, says she would never think of schooling her children any other way.

For Sachleben, her son Jacob is a gifted student who she felt would not have his needs met in a traditional school setting. Jacob is in eighth grade and has attended PAVCS since the beginning of his school career. Sachleben investigated the traditional setting for her son but decided cyberschooling was the way to go given his advanced nature.

"When you're in a brick and mortar class with 30 other kids, you can only go as fast as the slowest student in the room," Sachleben said.



SPECIAL TO SOUTH SCHUYLKILL NEWS:
JOHNATHAN B. PAROBY

Brenda Sachleben listens with her son Jacob Sachleben, 14, as he practices the piano for music class inside their Girardville home.



Jacob Sachleben studies a history book for a class he is taking. Although Jacob has attended cyberschool since kindergarten, he uses textbooks daily as part of his classes and homework.

Issue with cyber schools

As with everything, there are concerns raised with cyber charter schools from the public and government legislators.

Cyberschools have been under the microscope recently for lower student test scores. Some school districts and legislators question whether taxpayer money going to traditional schools should also go to cyber charter schools, which do not perform as well. The current per-student funding formula also draws criticism because some feel it siphons a disproportionate amount of funds away from the district, which must still pay overhead costs whether a student is occupying a seat in the classroom or not.

PAVCS usually ranks in the top two of the 16 cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania but is still below what the state considers appropriate. Hinkle, who also acts as a parent volunteer ambassador and moderator of the PAVCS parent Facebook message board, said those criticisms are not necessarily fair.

"I don't feel the folks expressing concern understand that the majority of the kids in cyberschool are students who have left the traditional public school setting because it has not worked for them," Hinkle said. "So when they're testing, they're testing lower because that's where their academics are."

However, Billups said PAVCS takes criticisms like that very seriously.

"We are very much for accountability and understand that when you're not performing and your results are not showing, we can understand how the model of education can come under fire," he said. "You have to take each school individually, just like how each district is taken individually. There are specific circumstances for

each individual school, and that goes for cyber charter schools, as well. We don't pick and choose our students. We take all students, and our goal is to put together an individualized approach to their education and ensure they achieve success."

Billups stressed that, contrary to rumor, all cyberschool teachers are fully certified, just like teachers in traditional schools. In addition, the computerized cyberschooling technology allows for supplemental academic benefits like breaking off into small groups for more personalized education.

Sachleben agreed incorrect stereotypes of cyber schools and their students are prevalent. When Sachleben investigated schooling options for Jacob, she brought him into the local district to meet with teachers and advisers who were surprised and impressed by his knowledge and ease of conversation. Sachleben credited that to the more self-paced nature of cyberschooling.

Another criticism cyberschools receive is a claim students doing most of their work behind a computer lack interaction. But cyber schools arrange multiple outings around the state for families and students to get together. At PAVCS, online classes usually happen Monday through Thursday with Friday open to complete out-of-class assignments or to participate in outings.

Billups said the cyber component of education could actually be seen as an advantage. "Being part of a cyberschool, you could grow up in Philadelphia and have friends in Pittsburgh," Billups said. "I think that's a great opportunity and really allows students to expand and learn about different communities in the state."

are more along the lines of self-scheduled and self-disciplined home schooling.

Hinkle does not regret choosing the cyberschool option and would do it again. It offered flexibility with doctor's appointments when a family member faced a health issue, and allowed her older children to chip in and help their younger siblings.

"I would pick cyberschool the whole way for all our students," she said.

In a similar situation, Sachleben was in a near-fatal auto accident four years ago, and the cyberschool was more than accommodating for her and Jacob's educational needs during the ordeal and recovery.

Billups stressed that parental involvement is key. Parents who are unsure if cyberschool is right for them can request a parent mentor.

"Some parents may not be comfortable supporting their child in algebra, for example," Billups said. "We partner with (an outside provider) to offer parent educational opportunities. When you enroll, we communicate to the families that parent involvement is key, and the parent is actively involved in helping to facilitate the education."

Looking ahead

Billups believes cyber charter schools will expand in Pennsylvania in the future.

"As the technology continues to grow and improve, it creates more opportunities for students to access education and knowledge," he said. "I think we're only scratching the surface, and there's so much more that we'll be able to accomplish in years to come."

Hinkle, who has been cyberschooling for 11 years and currently has three children in PAVCS, says the proof is in the pudding. Watching her daughter go from a fearful youngster who cried at not understanding her lessons to a straight-A student who eventually became an assistant preschool teacher has been rewarding.

"I never thought I would see it," she said.

Contact Michael Regensburger: 570-385-7358 or news@southschuylkillnews.com.

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