



2019-2020

# eLearning

ACADEMY



## I N S I D E

- BeLA testimonials
- Q&A with the BeLA coordinator
- BeLA vs. Cyber charter schools

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Bellefonte Area School District offers cyber education for its students who may feel this form of alternative learning is a good fit for them. The BeLA program – Bellefonte eLearning Academy – started in 2009 and offers the flexibility of virtual education with additional benefits that can't be found at cyber charter schools. This means a student who goes through the district's virtual program:

- Is a student of Bellefonte Area School District
- May work one-on-one with a certified teacher
- Can attend Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology
- Will graduate with a Bellefonte Area High School diploma

He or she may also participate in other Bellefonte Area-offered opportunities including:

- Classes and electives
- Athletics
- Clubs
- Extracurricular activities
- Fine arts
- International travel
- Advanced Placement courses
- College in High School through the University of Pittsburgh

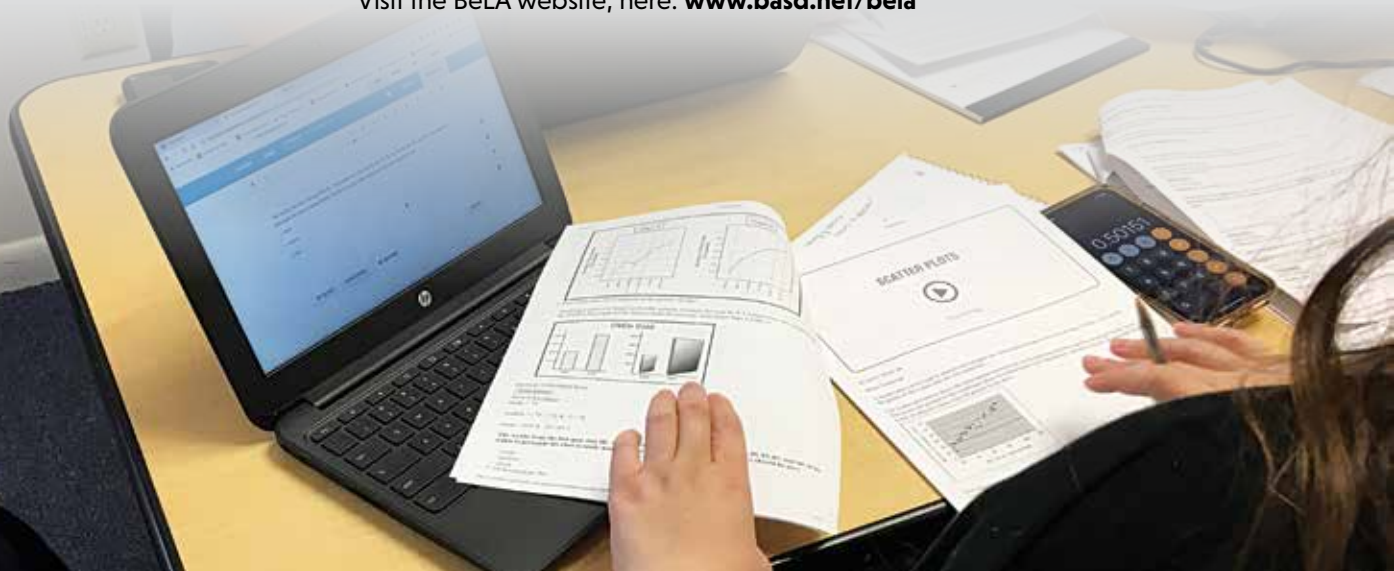
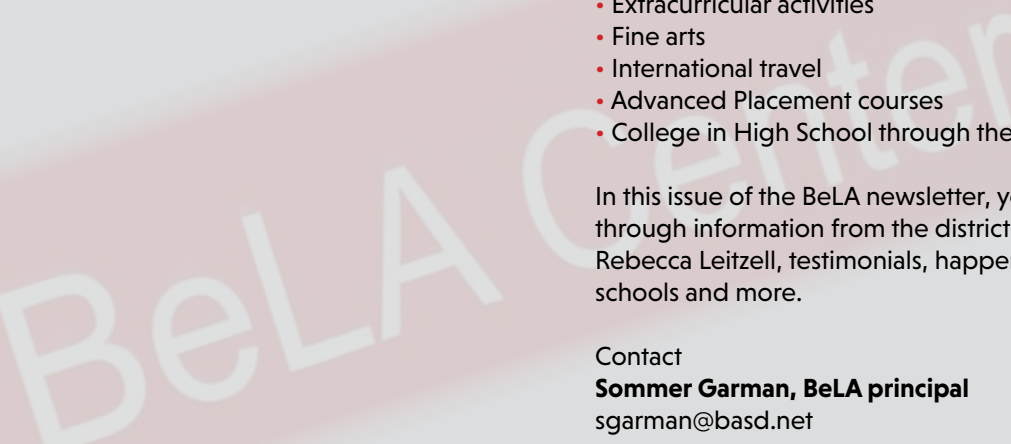
In this issue of the BeLA newsletter, you may learn more about the program through information from the district's Cyber Education Coordinator Rebecca Leitzell, testimonials, happenings in Harrisburg that could affect cyber schools and more.

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# LEGISLATION

## House Bill 526, Senate Bill 34 could make families pay out-of-pocket tuition for sending child to cyber charter schools

In the 2018-19 school year, Bellefonte Area School District spent \$582,113.56 to fund tuition for students within the district attending cyber charter schools, which district Director of Fiscal Affairs Ken Bean said is funded with taxpayer dollars. Under House Bill 526 and Senate Bill 34, that money could be saved and instead put toward a plethora of projects within the district, and could also come with tax savings for residents.

House Bill 526 and Senate Bill 34 would require families to pay out-of-pocket tuition for their child to attend cyber charter schools if their home school district offers its own cyber education program. Bellefonte Area School District does, through the Bellefonte eLearning Academy, under direction of Cyber Education Coordinator Rebecca Leitzell.

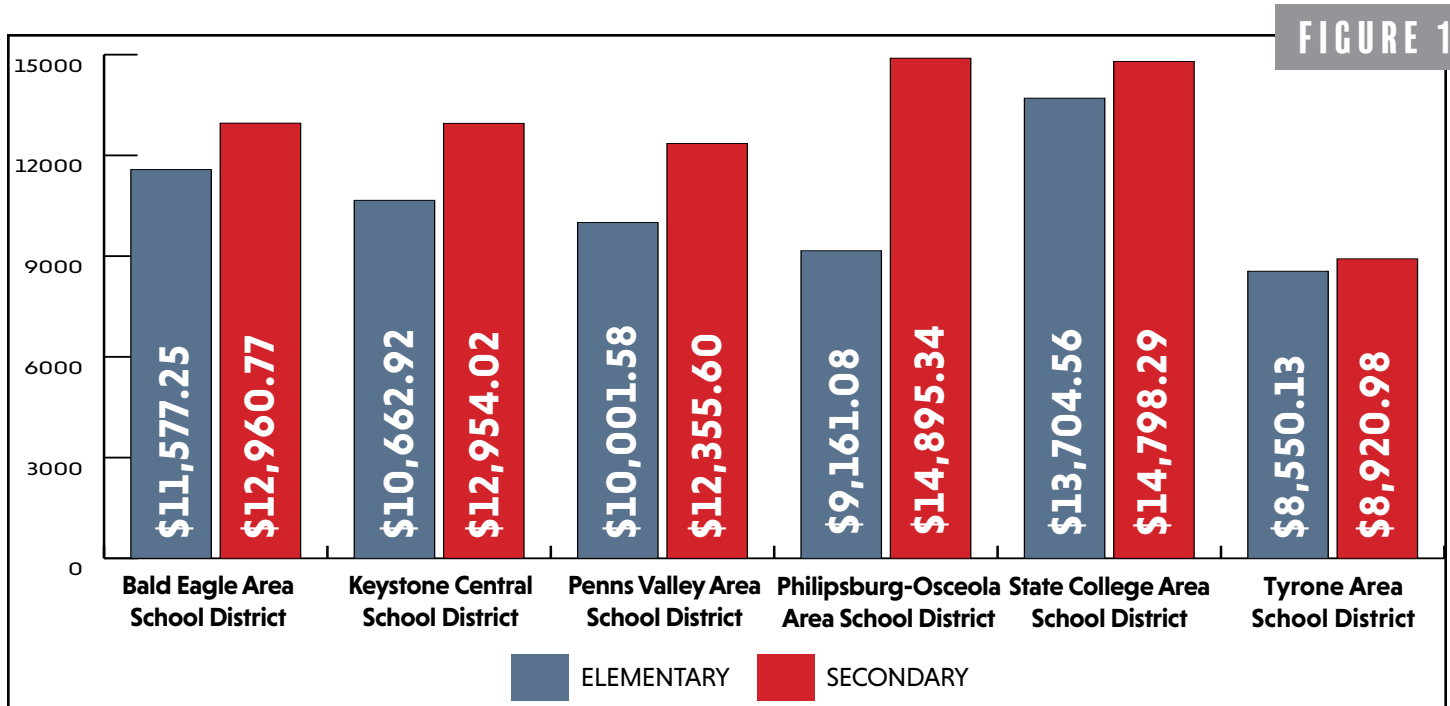
House Bill 526 is sponsored by Rep. Curt Sonney (R-Erie). Senate Bill 34 is sponsored by Sen. Judy Schwank (D-Berks) who said, "Tuition costs will be treated in cyber situations the

same as they are when resident students attend non-district brick-and-mortar schools."

If a student living within Bellefonte Area School District wanted to attend school at a different district from where he or she lives, those costs would vary. Below are some out-of-district tuition costs from the 2018-19 school year of school districts that serve Centre County. (Figure 1) Those figures will be updated in May 2020 by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

According to Superintendent Michelle Saylor, the average cost for Bellefonte Area students to attend BeLA is about \$4,000 per student. The average tuition for one student in a cyber charter school is about \$16,000.

Bean said that if the bills are passed, Bellefonte Area School District could use money saved from charter school tuition to instead be put toward district projects and potential hires, and taxpayer savings in millage rate.



## OTHER LEGISLATION

- **House Bill 355**, passed by the House of Representatives in June 2019, would prevent charter schools from claiming they're "tuition free." Charter schools are public schools funded by tax dollars, but operated privately.
- **Senate Bill 590** would require a Charter School Funding Advisory Committee to be established to review and make recommendations regarding charter school funding and related issues.

To learn more about how legislation could impact charter schools, visit this link: [www.basd.net/Page/14468](http://www.basd.net/Page/14468)

# REBECCA LEITZELL

BeLA TEACHER



Rebecca Leitzell,  
cyber education  
coordinator at  
Bellefonte Area  
School District



## Question: What is BeLA?

**Answer:** It stands for Bellefonte eLearning Academy. It's our cyber education program available for students in grades 3 through 12, and gives them an opportunity to have a different learning environment from the traditional brick and mortar setting.

## Q: Why start at third grade, instead of sooner or later?

**A:** We've been looking to expand, K-12. We haven't found a program that meets the needs for kindergarten, first and second grades in terms of curriculum that aligns with our district goals. We are looking to expand and will do so as soon as we find a program where students can be successful.

## Q: How has the program changed since its inception (in 2009)?

**A:** It started as a very small program with very few students and it has definitely grown throughout the past 10 years. We offered it only to high school students when it was first initiated and that has grown to now include middle school students and elementary school students, which started in 2016. We have expanded curriculum, changed vendors, enhanced expectations and rules – many of those things include making it more of a blended experience for students. So, if students like to participate in classes we do not offer online, then they can go into the school and take those classes.

## Q: When you talk about a "blended experience," that actually means going to school physically and virtually?

**A:** Yes, as long as a course is not available for a student online, then they can absolutely go to school and take a class. That includes having the opportunity to take AP (Advanced Placement) courses, classes through College in High School with the University of Pittsburgh or other classes with the option of getting credit through different universities. They may also take electives and attend Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology.

## Q: And when you talk about a "vendor," is that an outside company you work with?

**A:** Yes. We use a third-party provider. We currently use Odysseyware Academy for the majority of our classes. We went with Odysseyware curriculum because of the rigor and integrity of the courses. We felt

their program was most aligned to what we have here in the district. They provide their own teachers of record who are certified teachers in the state of Pennsylvania. They provide numerous academic supports, including online office hours, an academic hotline and virtual blackboard. One thing that is different with BeLA than other cyber programs is students have the opportunity to come in here to the district to get additional help and work one-on-one with a real person.



**Q: How many students participate in BeLA?**

**A:** Last year we had over 50 students that went through the program throughout the year. Some students will start and then say, "this isn't for me," and will return to the building. Again, it's not for everyone, and you have students who go back and forth. Some students travel and they may start in the program, so they can continue with Bellefonte curriculum and can transition back into the classroom upon their return.

**Q: Who is BeLA for?**

**A:** It's not for one particular type of student. Students do it for many reasons. A person who's successful in online learning is a learner that is self-motivated and self-driven and willing to be a self-starter and do things on their own. They have the opportunity to work ahead and excel and take additional classes. But it's also very difficult for some students to be motivated when they don't have a teacher standing before you saying, "OK, get to work, focus."

**Q: So, this isn't a cakewalk.**

**A:** It is definitely not the easy way out. Students need to be willing to take the initiative to get help when they're not understanding something. When a student wants to enroll in BeLA, I always ask if they talked to anyone in our program. I think word of mouth is that, "oh my gosh, it's so hard." And I think most kids you talk to will tell you that. It's not like showing up at school and getting participation points. There's none of that, so what you earn on your work is your actual grade – no freebies.

**Q: Is it something you want to expand?**

**A:** If it's for the right reasons for the student, then yes. When I started out in the program I saw a surge in my second year of kiddos who did it because they thought it was going to be the easy way out, and it's definitely not. It's a lot more work than they anticipate. We would like to see the program grow and expand to accommodate the needs of our student population.

**Q: What's the enrollment eligibility?**

**A:** We do have strict requirements for the kids, and students enroll for various reasons. They need to make sure in order to stay in the program, they maintain (at least) 70 percent in all classes, meet weekly requirements for hours and make sure they're staying on pace. If we see any of those things falling apart, they get a warning, so we give them one week to get back on track. If they don't get themselves back on pace, then they won't be allowed to continue in the program.

**Q: What's a day-in-the-life like of a student in BeLA?**

**A:** It's very different for each student. I have some students who are up every morning. I try to tell kids that it's best to have a schedule and treat it like it's regular school. We recommend one hour per class a day. So the typical high school student that's a freshman will have seven classes, so that's seven hours per day or 35 hours a week.

**Q: What are the benefits to participating in BeLA?**

**A:** One of the benefits to online learning in itself is the flexibility. Students have the ability to work at their own pace in their courses. Another benefit of staying in the district, for our program, is you're still a Bellefonte student, so you're going to graduate with your class. If you want, you can also still attend prom, dances, field trips and can participate in clubs and other extracurricular (school) activities, and our students receive a Bellefonte Area High School diploma. They have the option of working one-on-one with a teacher during the day at the BeLA Center and attend tutoring after school at the middle or high school. And of course, the option is still available to attend CPI.

**Q: What are the curriculum requirements?**

**A:** The requirements are going to be identical to what we require in the brick and mortar setting in Bellefonte. So, students enrolled in online courses will have to meet all the same graduation requirements as their peers attending the high school. Students are also still required to take physical education and complete all state-mandated testing requirements.

**Q: As the coordinator, what is your role?**

**A:** My responsibility is to make sure kids are doing what they need to be doing to ensure their academic success. They need to be meeting their end of the bargain. We need to account for attendance, so I monitor attendance on a weekly basis to make sure they're meeting their hour requirements, so we are in compliance with state attendance laws. I monitor grades and student pacing. I also communicate with parents, administrators, counselors and students on a daily basis. One thing I like about my job is I can't say, "this is what I do every day," because every day is different. And that's awesome. I will have kids in my office nonstop and truly enjoy working individually with students.

# TESTIMONIALS



*I like BeLA because it gives me the flexibility to work on my time, while also allowing me to work one-on-one with a teacher. You don't have that in a traditional classroom setting.*

**—Lily, senior**

*I started BeLA in the middle of last year and it has helped me improve my grades. I can work online and with a teacher when I need extra help, and have the ability to work at my own pace, without feeling pressure. I'm excited to graduate on time as a Bellefonte student at the end of the year with my mom in the crowd to see it.*

**—Alyssa, senior**

*We decided to enroll our daughter in Bellefonte eLearning Academy after she had a very traumatic and emotional start to the school year in 2018. BeLA was a wonderful experience! The added one-on-one support that was offered with Ms. (Rebecca) Leitzell made all the difference. She was attentive and involved in our child's daily learning process, which made her transition very easy. Our daughter thrived in her online studies. She was able to continue to attend band during the school day, as well as field trips, dances and special events and activities. This helped her continue to stay in touch with her friends and feel part of Bellefonte Area Middle School. She loved to be able to work at her own pace, pick and choose the subjects she wanted to start and finish first, and be in control of her own day. This gave her the time, space and confidence she needed to go back to BAMS this year.*

**—Leah, BeLA mom**

*The BeLA program is great, but it's Miss Leitzell who truly cares about the kids and goes above and beyond for them. Without Bellefonte eLearning Academy I would not have graduated. It gave me the opportunity to do my schoolwork without being in the confines of a brick-and-mortar high school. I am thankful this was an option for me while attending Bellefonte Area School District.*

**—Drew, Class of 2018**

*We were very hesitant when our daughter expressed a desire to do cyber school part way through her seventh-grade year. We explored other options such as PA Cyber, but were grateful to learn about Bellefonte eLearning Academy. We liked the idea that she could give it a try, but make a smooth transition back to Bellefonte Area Middle School if she decided it wasn't a good fit. We also liked that she'd still be a student of Bellefonte Area School District and have access to all of its resources such as the libraries, and opportunities such as band, orchestra and choir. Rebecca Leitzell was a great resource – she was very kind, helpful and encouraging. Our daughter loved the flexibility of working at her own pace and when she felt most productive. Visiting Ms. Leitzell during her office hours to get help with assignments was very valuable. Together we made the choice for our daughter to return to BAMS in eighth grade. She did so with a greater appreciation for the traditional school setting and her peers and teachers. We're grateful to live in a district which recognizes that not all students learn in the same way and therefore provides options, opportunities and support for our students to best meet their needs.*

**—BeLA mom**

# BeLA VS. CYBER CHARTER SCHOOLS

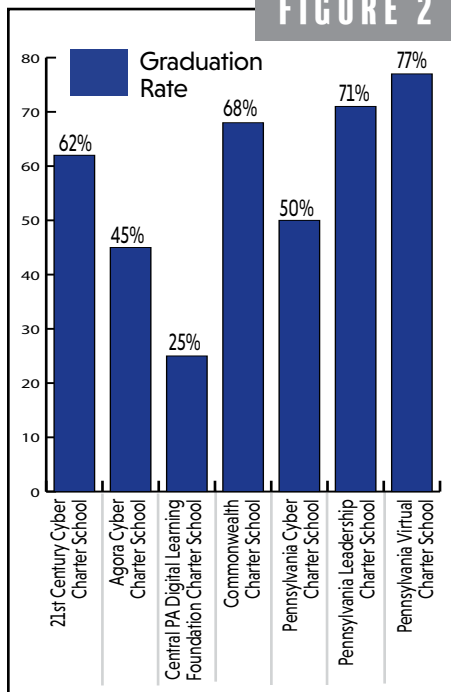
Cyber charter schools are established when the state Department of Education grants the cyber charter applicant a charter. Oversight PDE is responsible for the control of cyber charter schools that it has chartered, including decisions whether to renew, non-renew or revoke the charter.

In Pennsylvania, most cyber charter schools operate with expired state agreements. In an investigative report published in 2019 by the Philadelphia Inquirer, it found that 10 of 15 cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania are operating with expired charters.

The district also offers its own cyber program, called Bellefonte eLearning Academy, with many benefits that can't be found at cyber charter schools. BeLA students have the option to:

- Work one-on-one with a certified teacher
- Participate in district-sponsored extracurricular activities
- Enroll in classes offered in district brick-and-mortar schools that are not available online including Advanced Placement and College in High School courses
- Travel internationally on district-supported trips
- Attend Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology
- Graduate with a Bellefonte Area High School Diploma

**FIGURE 2**

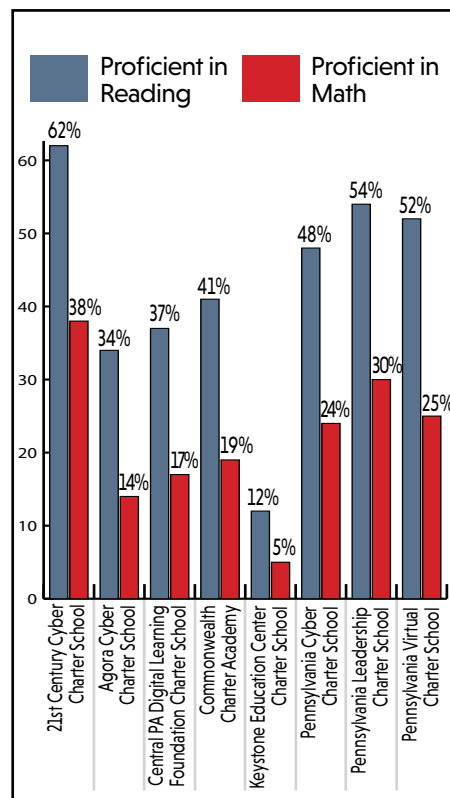


A report by Education Week shows that often times at least half of the student body fails to graduate on time from cyber charter schools. Please see FIGURE 2 for graduation rates of cyber charter schools attended by students living within the boundaries of Bellefonte Area School District, which tuition was paid for by the district in the 2018-19 school year.

There is a near-100 percent success rate for students passing classes through the district's BeLA program. Cyber Education Coordinator Rebecca Leitzell said that's because the program is set up in the best interest of the student to boost his or her success.

"If students struggle in BeLA, we meet to discuss alternative options to ensure student achievement," she said. "We do not allow them to continue with online learning and fail."

Information also shows that in the past five years, 100 percent of BeLA students who took state standardized tests have scored proficient or advanced. According to data from Niche.com, a Pittsburgh-based rating and review website, of the cyber charter schools funded by Bellefonte Area School District in the 2018-19 school year, none have higher statistics.



## RESPONSE FROM PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Communication Director for the Pennsylvania Department of Education Nicole Reigelman said that when Gov. Tom Wolf took office in 2015, there was no infrastructure in government for charter and cyber charter schools. Within the first year, the state Department of Education began laying the groundwork to establish a division of charter schools to help build a foundation in the department. By December 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act was passed that created policy for school improvement, including charter schools.

"In order to facilitate a thoughtful process, we wanted a good plan in place, and ESSA created a good opportunity to create infrastructure in total for evaluating all schools," Reigelman said. "We are using that same infrastructure to (also) evaluate all cyber charters."

In November of 2018, PDE launched the Future Ready PA Index and soon after identified schools for the federal school improvement designations: Comprehensive Support and Improvement and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement designations, which are ways to evaluate school and student group performance, including charter and cyber charter schools.

Since last year, PDE has renewed the charters of two cyber charter schools that PDE reported were among the "higher-performing" in the commonwealth. Reigelman added that the department is also working with cyber charter schools that are underperforming to potentially surrender their charter.

To read the full response, visit this link: [www.basd.net/Page/14670](http://www.basd.net/Page/14670)



**BELLEFONTE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT**

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