

New York Times Fact Check – December 15, 2011

The New York Times	Facts
<i>“By Wall Street standards, though, Agora is a remarkable success...”</i>	False. Agora is a public school and has absolutely no relationship to Wall Street.
<i>“The pupils work from their homes, in some cases hundreds of miles from their teachers. There is no cafeteria, no gym and no playground. Teachers communicate with students by phone or in simulated classrooms on the Web.”</i>	Only partially true. The NYT scrupulously avoids any reference to the bricks-and-mortar learning centers, including Agora’s Philadelphia-based learning center for blended learning, or other face-to-face aspects of online programs (i.e. academic field trips, teacher home visits, special ed services, etc...).
<i>“Agora is expecting income of \$72 million this school year, accounting for more than 10 percent of the total anticipated revenues of K12, the biggest player in the online-school business.”</i>	False. K12 only receives income from Agora for the provision of curriculum and services pursuant a contract reviewed and approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education in the Charter process. Agora’s income cannot be equated to K12 revenues.
<i>“The growth of for-profit online schools...”</i>	False. There is no such thing as a for-profit online school. The schools are governed by non-profit independent charter or district public school boards.
<i>“Instead, a portrait emerges of a company that tries to squeeze profits from public school dollars by raising enrollment, increasing teacher workload and lowering standards.”</i>	False. Enrollment policies are set by public school boards and state law. Teacher workload is established by public school boards in the budget process. Standards are set by state and local regulatory authorities.
<i>“...recruitment efforts that fail to filter out students...”</i>	False and unsourced. As the NYT is aware, “filtering” students in public schools is for the most part illegal, primarily because it leads to discrimination.
<i>“Teachers have had to take on more and more students, relaxing rigor and achievement along the way...”</i>	False and unsourced. Again, teacher workloads are established by the Boards, and there is no evidence of relaxed rigor. The academic difficulty of the program is one of the primary reasons cited by those leaving the schools served by K12.
<i>“...with some high school teachers managing more than 250 students...”</i>	Misleading. As the NYT was briefed, this was a short-term circumstance resulting from higher than expected enrollment at the beginning of the year at a single school, and was resolved by teacher hiring as soon as hiring and training could take place.
<i>“A look at a forthcoming study by researchers at Western Michigan University and the National Education Policy Center shows...”</i>	Misleading. This study was funded by the NEA, a union organization on the record as opposing full-time online schools education under any circumstances.

<i>“Some teachers at K12 schools said they felt pressured to pass students who did little work.”</i>	False and unsourced. Teachers are not pressured into assigning a passing grade to a student who did not earn it.
<i>“These folks are fundamentally trying to do to public education what the banks did with home mortgages.”</i>	Conclusory opinion advanced by a long-time critic of public education reform that lacks any factual or logical support.
<i>“The online companies can tailor their programs by reducing curriculum and teachers.”</i>	False. Curriculum purchases are established by public school boards. Curriculum standards are set at the state level. Teacher decisions are set by public school boards in the budget process.
<i>“...the online companies collect nearly as much taxpayer money in some states as brick-and-mortar charter schools.”</i>	False. The companies do not collect taxpayer money. All taxpayer funds are distributed pursuant state formulas to public schools, which then contract for curriculum and services.
<i>“The state auditor general, Jack Wagner, said that is double or more what it costs the companies to educate those children online.”</i>	False. Mr. Wagner has no support for this proposition.
<i>“But for most children, particularly in the elementary grades, the school experience should not be replaced with online learning, they say.”</i>	Unsourced. The “they” referenced by the NYT would appear to be the official position of the NEA, which the NYT wishes not to name.
<i>“East Penn School District in Pennsylvania, which is outperforming Agora and other online schools its students attend.”</i>	Misleading and unsourced. This conclusion could not be drawn without knowing the characteristics of the students involved in the comparison. Students leaving East Penn and other school districts are obviously doing so for a reason.
<i>“K12 had decided to tap into public education dollars.”</i>	False. K12 must be selected as a provider by a public school, just as any other private company providing curriculum or services to a public school. K12 is one of literally thousands of private companies that serve public schools.
<i>“Mr. Bennett, who left the company in 2005, originally said a home-schooling package would cost about \$1,000 per student per year. Parents who wanted teacher support would pay more. Today, K12 receives an average of \$5,500 to \$6,000 per student from state and local governments. The schools also receive money for federal programs.”</i>	Intentionally misleading. The purported “comparison” between the two figures does not apply. The \$1,000 figure was for solely core curriculum in grades K-2. The second figure is for the full operation, management and curriculum of a full-time school, including, teachers, administrators, counselors, etc...
<i>“But online schools have negligible building costs...”</i>	False. Many online schools operate in a “hybrid” or “blended” model, and operate bricks-and-mortar facilities, including Agora.
<i>“Parents, called “learning coaches,” do much of the teaching,”</i>	False. Certified teachers are responsible for teaching and academic results in most online public schools, including Agora.

<p><i>“But companies like K12 are almost fully in charge – devising curriculum, hiring teachers and principals and evaluating student performance.”</i></p>	<p>False. As specified in every K12 service agreement, the board of the public school is responsible for setting policies of the school and overseeing K12’s implementation of their policies.</p>
<p><i>“Another way K12 maximizes its income is to establish schools in poor districts...”</i></p>	<p>False. Schools are established by school districts and charter school boards pursuant the specific laws of their state.</p>
<p><i>“The Tennessee Virtual Academy is technically part of the local school district,”</i></p>	<p>False. There is nothing “technical” about the Tennessee Virtual Academy being part of the local school district.</p>
<p><i>“Dozens of other Tennessee counties, however, lost state financing when some of their students elected to go to the virtual school.”</i></p>	<p>Intentionally Misleading. Under longstanding TN state law, when a student chooses to attend a school in another district, state funding follows the student to the district actually responsible for educating the student.</p>
<p><i>“A sizeable portion of the public money collected by K12 is rolled back into generating business...”</i></p>	<p>False. K12 only receives funds through contracts entered into with public schools.</p>
<p><i>“School employees who have visited the center have described a high-pressured sales environment aimed at one thing: enrollment.”</i></p>	<p>False and unsourced. Enrollment counselors solely respond to inquiries from parents, and follow-up with information on the school. If the parent chooses to enroll their child, enrollment counselors assist them with the enrollment process, which is highly regulated by state law. Only a very small portion of parents who request information about online school ultimately choose to enroll their student.</p>
<p><i>““The kids enroll. You get the money, the kids disappear,” he said.”</i></p>	<p>False. Payment and enrollment policies are set by the state and applied uniformly across public schools. In most states, payment is dependent upon more than a single count date (a policy K12 has actively supported.) This allegation is made by a reform critic and is not supported by an analysis of state laws.</p>
<p><i>“A review of K12 management contracts reveals that the company may still benefit from students who end up leaving.”</i></p>	<p>False. In some instances K12 recoups some of its upfront costs associated with enrolling and starting the student that then leaves. In no instance does K12 benefit financially from a student leaving.</p>
<p><i>“With retention a problem, some teachers said they were under pressure to pass students with marginal performance and attendance.”</i></p>	<p>False and unsourced. There is absolutely no pressure on teachers to inappropriately pass students.</p>
<p><i>“Several current and former staff members said that a lax policy had allowed students to remain on the rolls even when they failed to log in for days.”</i></p>	<p>False. Agora’s attendance and truancy policies are dictated by, and complies with state law.</p>

<p><i>“Its newest conquest is Tennessee, where the company got legislative approval last May and began holding information sessions in July.”</i></p>	<p>False. K12 was selected in a public process by a school district in Tennessee to provide curriculum and services for its online school offering.</p>
<p><i>“Ms. Alhammadi had become parent and teacher, wrapped into one.”</i></p>	<p>False and unsourced. Fully licensed teachers are responsible for the teaching duties of the students.</p>
<p><i>“A teacher with an elementary class that size and a 40-hour workweek could devote little more than 30 minutes a week to each student.”</i></p>	<p>Misleading. The instructional methods in an online school are different than in a classroom. The model allows more flexibility for one-on-one and small group instruction. This is a characteristic often cited by both teachers and families in their choice of an online school.</p>
<p><i>“With teacher salaries and benefits the biggest cost to K12, increasing student-to-teacher ratios is an easy way for the company to increase profits.”</i></p>	<p>False. Teacher staffing decisions are set by the boards of the public schools in their annual budget process. Further, numerical comparisons between online and classroom settings are not valid comparisons due to the differences of the models.</p>
<p><i>“Together, the groups have formed a lobbying juggernaut in state capitals.”</i></p>	<p>False and unsourced. Any basic research demonstrates that unions and other education establishment interests far outspend in lobbying and political contributions than those advocating for reform.</p>
<p><i>“An analysis by the National Institute on Money in State Politics concluded that K12 and its employees had also contributed nearly \$500,000 to state political candidates across the country from 2004 to 2010. “</i></p>	<p>Misleading. These contributions are a tiny fraction of what unions and other status quo forces spend.</p>
<p><i>“One of the industry’s most persuasive promotional tools has been the young children...”</i></p>	<p>False. Parents do not volunteer their children to be used as promotional tools. It is also patently offensive to parents who have stood up for their children’s education across the nation. Parents are the most under-represented voice in educational policy-making.</p>