One could easily wonder if we might be seeing the beginning of the end of public schools as we know them. A Tennessee law that went into effect July 1 has led to the creation of ‘virtual schools’ in that state. With implementation of the law, Tennessee joins 28 other states plus the District of Columbia to offer public school students a free online stay-at-home education operated by the for-profit vendor, K12 Inc.

Here’s how the school works: Students are able to get their education without leaving home, just like a traditional home school. However, the curriculum is the same as for students attending traditional schools. And although the students will not be attending a bricks-and-mortar school building each day or sit in a classroom with fellow students, they will still face many of the same requirements as other students. For example, they will be required to take the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program achievement tests and must meet all other state requirements, including logging onto the computer each day to record attendance.

Under the new state law, local school districts have been authorized to create virtual schools, open to any student in the state, not just those living in the district. The state pays the district $5,400 per student to operate the virtual school. The district pays nothing. When Union County Public Schools launched the Tennessee Virtual Academy last month it contracted with K12 Inc, a for-profit education vendor based in Virginia. Under the arrangement, Union County is entitled to keep 4 percent of the state’s funding to cover administrative costs. The rest is funneled to K12 Inc. to pay teacher salaries and the cost of materials, including computers.

More than 2,000 students have already signed up for program. Reportedly, the concept has drawn criticism from the Tennessee Education Association, an organization representing public school teachers. An official from TEA questions whether the state should be paying a for-profit company – K12 Inc. – to educate children at home on a computer. Supporters, however, contend virtual schools are less costly to the state and supplement other education options available to parents, such as private, magnet, traditional and charter schools.

For more information about K12 Inc, see http://www.k12.com/ [2]. You can also read more about the Tennessee Virtual Academy at http://www.k12.com/tnva [3].

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