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School's tie with Montessori questioned

by Lisa Gagnon

The Department of Education is examining the relationship between Virtual Community School of Ohio (VCSO) and DeColores Montessori School, as well as a suburban Cleveland school, according to an AP report.

DeColores Administrator Nancy Dean acknowledged in a Nov. 23 Daily Advocate article that the Montessori school has had a relationship with VCSO for approximately a year. She said that about 80 of DeColores' 155 students became VCSO students this school year.

"They're not in our count at DeColores," emphasized Dean.

The school receives funding from VCSO for the students, funding which comes from local property taxes, as well as state and federal monies. In addition, the school charges the students fees for additional services, such as music and foreign language education.

Private schools receive only auxiliary monies funneled through local public school districts, which, in this case, would be Greenville City Schools, according to Jim Degan, Ohio Department of Education District 2 Coordinator. If a student becomes a member of a chartered public school, such as VCSO, tax dollars follow the student to the school in which he or she is enrolled.

Dean noted that such a system remedies an inequity in the system and now, parents' tax dollars help to support their own children's education.

VCSO is sponsored by Reynoldsburg City Schools and is the state's third-largest online charter school.

The investigation arose as a result of charges that the arrangement violates an Ohio law preventing private schools from converting to charter schools.

Dean had emphasized that only a portion of the school's former students had become VCSO students and that DeColores remains a private school. She said that the school has traditionally offered additional services to home-schooled and other students.

Degan said that the Department of Education does not approve or disapprove anything in which this funding is involved.

"That's not something the ODE would be involved in. When this was discussed, and I explained to School Options what was happening, obviously, they felt that was okay," he said.

VCSO Superintendent Don Musick noted in the AP report that the issue had been discussed with the Ohio Attorney General's office and ODE officials.

Reynoldsburg City Schools Superintendent Richard Ross has asked the state to study the contracts to determine their legality, the AP reported.