

Students all a-Twitter in their Virtual Capitol Tour

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They weren't exactly traditional news updates. But the messages Open High School of Utah students sent via Twitter from the Capitol on Thursday were, at the very least, eye-opening. "this building is so pretty!" tweeted ninth-grader Rebecca Atwood of the Capitol building. "it looks like the castle in Harry Potter!!!"

In what might have been a first, about 125 students from the Open High School went on a virtual field trip to the Capitol on Thursday to celebrate Charter School Day there. About 40 of the school's students physically went to the Capitol, and other students stayed home posing questions and reading live updates on Twitter.com from their classmates and teachers.

"We can tell everyone who's missing everything what's going on," said ninth-grader Jake Atwood. The innovative field trip came on a day when state leaders gathered to celebrate innovations in Utah charter schools. Utah now has 71 charter schools with 34,000 students. Only five years ago, Utah had just 27 charter schools.

Charter schools are public schools created by parents, teachers or community leaders that often take a different approach to education. Charter schools began in Utah about 10 years ago, and state leaders are still trying to iron out funding issues between charter and traditional schools. The Utah

Association of Public Charter Schools is now working on a bill with Rep. Ron Bigelow, R-West Valley City, to start closing gaps between charter and traditional school funding, said the association's Kim Frank.

But on Thursday, students from across the state who celebrated the day with the governor and lawmakers talked more about innovation than financing. Gov. Gary Herbert called charter schools a "good example" for other states.

A recent Center for Education Reform report said Utah has the fourth-strongest system of charter school laws in the nation. "It's no longer an experiment," said Steve Winitzky, executive director of the association, of charter schools in Utah. "It's a thriving explosion of alternate forms of education in our school system."

The Open High School, for example, is a virtual, online school, and uses learning materials and textbooks that are freely available for anyone's use. The materials can be fit to individual students' needs because they're not bound by copyright or licensing restraints.

Open High School parent Teresa Ferrel of Spanish Fork said the school has been a good fit for her daughter. She said when she heard about the school's latest venture, a virtual field trip via Twitter, she was skeptical, but she soon changed her mind.

"It's their world," Ferrel said. "It's a good thing for them to do."

Becky Ellis, who teaches a current issues class for the school, said she's trying to teach students how to use social media to further engage with the world. She said it's a new, important way to spread information, pointing to the role social media have played in spreading news about Iran and Haiti, for example.

"They get a real-time experience even though they can't be here," Ellis said. "They're tweeting to learn how to use social media ... but they're also learning how democracy works."

Or as, ninth-grader Sydnee Gay put it in a tweet: "this is so cool! I feel like i really know what's going on in the world. Or well i mean what's going on in Utah!"

Tweets from the tour

Tweets from the Open High School of Utah's virtual field trip from students, teachers and parents, some written in typical Twitter shorthand:

"Some of the representatives aren't listening to the speaker."

"We are waiting for something that takes forever."

"all in favor, say i?" Haha i love this place!"

"we're in the house! Right over the main dude!"

"we're in the 'house' right now. watching amendments being passed. awesome!!!!"

"Senate roll call? Hey, where's Buttars? I want to ask him about his plan to eliminate 12th grade."