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## Ron Packard's Accel For-Profit Charter School Operation May Run Half of West Virginia's First Charter Schools

The Ohio D-ranked Accel charter school operator is in line to run half of West Virginia's first charter schools. Ron Packard, former CEO of the publicly traded K12 company, left K12 Inc. to start Pansophic Learning, of which Accel is a part. Accel has a huge presence in Ohio, with less than a stellar record of performance.

It is of at least passing interest that Packard's former employer (K12 Inc.) is in line to run the West Virginia charter school Virtual Academy.

### **One company could run half of WV's first charter schools. Ohio doesn't rank it highly.**

By Ryan Quinn [ryan.quinn@hdmediallc.com](mailto:ryan.quinn@hdmediallc.com)

Nov 4, 2021

**CHARLES TOWN** — Accel Schools says it serves schools in seven states. West Virginia could be the eighth.

The fast-expanding charter school management company's name is on half the six applications to open charters here. Lawmakers tout charters as a way to improve Mountain State education.

In neighboring Ohio, 17 of 30 Accel schools were graded D's and five others were graded F's in 2018-19 by the state Department of Education. Accel says it serves more than 50 schools.

Ron Packard, founder of K12 Inc., an online charter school business traded on the New York Stock Exchange, left that company in 2014 and started Pansophic Learning. Accel is part of that private, international firm.

Since 2014, Accel has virtually expanded to the Pacific, with online charters in California and Washington state. It has become the largest school management company in Ohio, home to most of the brick-and-mortar charters Accel runs.

It has yet to go farther east. West Virginia has put out an invitation.

In this year's regular legislative session, Republicans fast-tracked a law allowing charters to expand faster, teach almost solely online and apply for approval from a new, unelected West Virginia Professional Charter School Board.

A month after Gov. Jim Justice signed the law, Accel hired two lobbyists, according to the state Ethics Commission. One is Larry Puccio, who represents prominent businesses, including the governor's Greenbrier resort.

Now Accel is trying to reach the tip of the Eastern Panhandle with a brick-and-mortar, 650-student maximum charter in Jefferson County. On Oct. 18, Accel's Chad Carr spoke to a mostly receptive audience in Charles Town, the county seat.

A second Accel brick-and-mortar charter, Nitro Preparatory Academy, would be located at the edge of the state's most populous county and enroll up to 600 students.

Accel's Virtual Preparatory Academy would enable it to reach all of West Virginia. Or, at least, the parts in the hills and hollows that can get online. The school would provide laptops, and max out at 2,000 students.

The Professional Charter School Board could approve all three Accel schools Wednesday during an online meeting scheduled to start at 8 a.m.

The Nitro, Eastern Panhandle and Virtual Preparatory academies are overseen by separate boards, save for one shared member. The Nitro and Eastern Panhandle applications are almost identical.

The Ohio Department of Education rated Accel a "D" operator in 2018-19, the last school year before the pandemic. Ohio hasn't graded operators or schools since.

The agency graded a half-dozen Accel schools as C's, two as B's and none as A's. More than two-thirds of Accel's schools in the Buckeye State received the lowest two letter grades. Rapidly expanding Accel's recent takeover of some schools might have been a factor in the grades, an official said.

"With regards to the Ohio academic records," Accel spokeswoman Courtney Harritt wrote in an email, "it is a complex analysis because Accel has a specialty in turning schools around academically and financially. The majority of the schools we manage are going through the academic turnaround process."

The Ohio letter grades are composed of multiple measures, including students' overall achievement on state tests and their rate of improvement.

### **Acceleration**

Carr said he was swept up in the company's expansion when Accel took over the charter chain for which he worked.

"Accel is made up of different, uh, organizations that have tried to do charter schools and not done 'em very well," Carr told the Charles Town crowd. He said his own school excelled academically, but not financially.

"In Ohio, we run schools on a third of what the traditional public schools run 'em on," Carr said of Accel.

Education service provider companies like Accel can't turn a profit from per-student state funding if they don't keep down expenses.

The Nitro and Eastern Panhandle Preparatory academies set a goal of maintaining "a grade of C or higher on the West Virginia School Report Card."

West Virginia ditched its letter-grade system for schools in 2017. Nitro and Eastern Panhandle Preparatory set academic goals, but those don't take into account scores on state standardized tests by which public schools are judged.

State law gives charter applicants the chance to correct "identified deficiencies" in applications before the charter board decides.

Answering questions now is "premature," Harritt wrote in an email "because we haven't yet received application feedback from the charter board. We are still working through the iterative process."

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The Virtual Preparatory Academy application includes a goal to meet or exceed the statewide average for student proficiency in math, English language arts and science.

"Each year, the school will strive for a 2% improvement from the prior year," the application says.

The only non-Accel brick-and-mortar charter proposed in this state, West Virginia Academy near Morgantown, isn't planning to use a management company like Accel to run its daily operations.

But the boards of the other two incipient charters are planning to use service providers. The online [West Virginia Connections Academy](#) plans to use Pearson, the international education company that also sells textbooks to public schools.

[West Virginia Virtual Academy](#) plans to use Stride Inc., the new name for K12 Inc.

Lawmakers allowed up to 10 charters to open, but only two statewide virtual charters. So Accel's Virtual Preparatory Academy might not open if the Charter School Board instead approves other schools' applications.

This means Packard's old company is competing with his new one, which includes five other executive leaders originally from K12 Inc.

At the Charles Town public forum, Carr explained Accel's approach, telling the more than 30 people there the strategy includes tests assessing only the past two weeks of learning.

"It's small, six questions, but it has to cover exactly what you just taught," said Carr, who wore boots and Dallas Cowboys cuff links with his suit.

"You give it to the students. If they know it and they do well on it, move on. But if they don't know it, you need to go back and reteach it," Carr said of teachers. "And that's when somebody like me steps in and says, 'Hey, here's a couple of ways that you need to fix this.' And it works."

Joanne Curran, an attendee, was open to the pitch.

"Why wouldn't everybody want to go?" she asked. "And — I literally can't understand a downside, so it's a serious question."

"I don't know," Carr said. "It's, it's really hard, it's really hard to answer."

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**The profiteers are lining their pockets with public funds that should be used in the classrooms.**

By WSAZ News Staff

Published: Nov. 10, 2021 at 8:32 AM EST|Updated: 6 hours ago

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. (WSAZ) - The West Virginia Professional Charter School Board approved West Virginia's first charter schools during a virtual meeting Wednesday morning.

The Board met to consider seven applications from companies looking to open new virtual and in-person education options.

Three in-person schools were approved Wednesday morning: West Virginia Academy, Eastern Panhandle Academy and Nitro Preparatory Academy.

Two of those learning proposals, the Eastern Panhandle Academy and Nitro Preparatory Academy, were submitted by the company ACCEL Schools.

ACCEL wants to open the first in-person charter school in our region.

The Nitro Prep Academy, which would be located in the former Nitro High School building, hopes to attract up to 600 students in kindergarten through eighth grade from Kanawha and Putnam counties, according to its application. That would include pulling students from Nitro Elementary School, which will share a parking lot with the new charter school, and Rock Branch Elementary School, which is one of West Virginia's three National Blue Ribbon Schools and is located less than a 10-minute drive from the proposed charter school.

Nitro Prep said in its application to the state, "there is a need in this area for a high-quality charter school because neither county is excelling academically." The application goes on to state it hopes to create an individualized learning environment as "an alternative to traditional public schools that have been ineffective in meeting certain family and student learning needs, or cost-prohibitive private schools."

In addition to the in-person charter school, ACCEL wants to add a statewide virtual option. The West Virginia Professional Charter School Board is set to consider applications for virtual learning next week.

This is a developing story.

[West Virginia's first charter schools gain approval by board members \(wsaz.com\)](https://www.wsaaz.com/news/charter-schools-approve-11-12-2021)