

**Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee**  
**Public Hearing on Charter School Funding**  
**Everett Area High School**  
**1 Renaissance Circle, Everett, PA 15537**  
**August 14, 2019**

**Written Testimony of**  
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**President and CEO, Commonwealth Charter Academy Cyber Charter School**

Good afternoon, Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman, honorable members of the Senate Education Committee and fellow panelists.

I intend to leave my remarks brief so as to allow ample time for specific questions regarding the operation of a high-quality public cyber charter school.

My name is Dr. Maurice Flurie, President and CEO of Commonwealth Charter Academy Cyber Charter School. I am also a member of the Board of Directors for the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools. As an educator with nearly four decades in both the traditional and non-traditional public school sectors, I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss critical facts as well as dispel long held myths surrounding public cyber charter school funding, fiscal operations and student performance.

Like you, CCA is committed to being good stewards of Pennsylvania taxpayer dollars and using public funds in a fiscally responsible, transparent manner that ensures children in public charter schools are receiving the best possible educational opportunities in the public school that best meets their needs. The public charter school community strongly supports accountable, fair and consistent oversight of every charter school. Without such accountability, we will never fully develop a strong and consistently high-performing charter school sector that serves families throughout the Commonwealth.

To that end, my testimony will focus on three key areas: first, cyber charter school revenue and expenditures, concentrating on unique costs; second, identification of students and costs surrounding special education; and finally, student academic growth.

### **Cyber Charter School Revenues and Expenditures**

Providing a high-quality statewide cyber school to students from the urban and rural areas of the state, and every type of community in between, requires considerable financial resources. As a statewide public charter school with students in every county in Pennsylvania, CCA and other cyber charters have unique expenditures dedicated to serving students across the Commonwealth.

**Appendix 1** outlines specific, independently audited expenses incurred by CCA. While the numbers will obviously differ for each cyber charter school, the need to finance these unique areas is universal. It is important to draw a distinction between the costs associated with a district's or intermediate unit's (IU) cyber program that supports an established public school

district versus the costs associated with operating a unique, comprehensive, statewide cyber charter school.

Many costs to deliver a quality, comprehensive cyber charter school are unique to the cyber environment and are what truly separates a quality school from an average or inferior “packaged” online program.

Quality cyber charter schools spend considerable funds on logistics and fulfillment to immediately deliver curriculum and technology supplies to families enrolled in the school. The cost to track and ship every book, workbook, computer, printer, special devices and other miscellaneous curriculum supplies is immense.

The development, production, and deployment of dedicated online curriculum resources is unique to the cyber school and is one of the single most expensive endeavors. A sound online curriculum does not merely put a printed textbook on a CD or convert it to an e-reader format or, worse yet, simply provide materials and message boards in open source platforms, such as Moodle.

A quality cyber charter school provides student interaction opportunities; embedded video and other rich media content; ongoing quick-checks for understanding; and real-time assessment tools and data on student performance that is available to the student, parent, and teacher. Interactive videoconferencing features that function similarly to a SMART board and live, virtual, one-on-one opportunities to work with teachers in a real-time format are also essential.

A technology support structure that is able to service an inventory of over 15,000 computers, provide real-time support for students and families and deliver computers to families in less than 48 hours, should replacement technology be needed, is vital to provide accessibility to all of the features previously mentioned.

Since a statewide cyber charter must serve all enrolled students across the Commonwealth and is not bound by a small geographic boundary of a brick-and-mortar school, this a significant cost driver uniquely incurred by cyber charter schools.

A second example of unique costs are those associated with meeting state testing requirements.

To administer PSSAs and Keystone Exams, CCA deploys its entire teaching and administrative staff of over 600 individuals across the state in more than 65 locations throughout the various testing windows. Costs incurred by CCA include securing facilities more than a year in advance, transportation, lodging, and meals for staff during this time frame. It is CCA’s goal to be able to provide a state testing location that is no more than one hour from the homes of all enrolled families, which requires dedicated personnel and an extensive amount of logistical planning and resources. For the upcoming school year, we anticipate these expenditures could approach \$600,000.

### **Special Education Costs for Cyber Charter Schools**

It is clear that considerable misinformation has been communicated regarding cyber charter schools and special education services. Cyber charter schools are mandated to deliver the same

continuum of services to identified special education students as those in traditional schools, despite the fact that charter schools receive less funding than traditional schools.

Since CCA's more than 2,200 special education students are spread throughout the Commonwealth, it must contract with many providers across the state for services – not just a handful like many local public school districts are able to do. While some IUs have been excellent partners, that is certainly not the case with all. Some IUs have refused to work with us at all, while others have charged much higher rates than those charged to traditional public schools.

When we are unable to partner with IUs, we must contract with private, third-party providers for services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, sign language interpretation, and psychiatric testing, to name just a few. These costs are further increased due the necessity to reimburse providers for travel expenses which can ultimately exceed the actual cost of the therapy or service in many remote areas. These are only a portion of the special education expenses mandated for public schools.

Just as in traditional schools, cyber charter schools must provide educational testing and evaluative services when requested by the parent. Again, these services are most often provided by contracted service providers in the region of the family's residence at a cost that often well-exceeds the cost of the same service if provided in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting. Because these are mandated requirements for 22 percent of CCA's student population, this is substantial cost-driver.

For these reasons, it is imperative that any legislative proposals that are focused on ensuring fiscal responsibility with taxpayer dollars be fair to **all students in all public schools**.

A student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a federally mandated contract between a family and a public school. Neither the requirements nor the services are lessened because a family chooses a charter or cyber charter school.

Federally mandated IEP requirements are blind to a child's color, gender, age, or type of school he or she attends – so, too, should our funding to educationally support these children. All are of equal value and should be treated as such.

The most glaring myth that must be dispelled is that cyber charter schools are “profiting” from special education. In **Appendix 2**, you will see audited numbers that reflect that while 20 percent of CCA's student population receives special education services, this accounts for 35 percent of CCA's total expenditures. In other words, the revenue received to provide special education programs and services to students was significantly deficient to meet these students' mandated IEP service requirements.

## **Student Growth**

During the 2018-19 school year, CCA's student population exceeded 9,600, of which, more than 3,500 students were newly enrolled – a number larger than the enrollment of the majority of Pennsylvania's school districts.

Since so many of our newly enrolled students arrive significantly behind academically, it requires comprehensive diagnostic testing. The majority of these students are behind by one or more grade levels and require extensive remediation and extra academic support. While a traditional school district may have the expense of providing evaluation and diagnostic testing to a small number of new students each year, CCA must do it for **the equivalent of an entire school district every year.**

In fact, CCA administers the i-Ready Diagnostic Assessment (i-Ready), a nationally normed and recognized reading and math assessment, to all students in grades K-8 at the beginning, midpoint and end of each school year. This allows us to closely monitor the academic growth of all students. The PSSA and Keystone Exams simply are inadequate to measure each student's individual incremental growth during the school year and year-over-year.

This lends itself to another commonly promulgated myth that many organizations, such as CREDO and other carelessly crafted research initiatives, disseminate that cyber charter students are not making adequate academic progress. **Appendices 3, 4 and 5** outline the academic deficiencies of incoming students at CCA as well as the academic gains these students achieve over time. This compels us to pose a very important question to those who believe the PSSA is a litmus test for student academic achievement.

Let's take an eighth-grade student who is enrolled in a cyber or brick-and-mortar charter school and is three years behind academically. When that student takes the PSSA in the spring of his or her first year at the charter school, who should be held responsible for his or her failing to be proficient on the exam? What I am stating is that we cannot wave a magic wand and undo multiple years of academic deficiency, but we have demonstrated that we can enable that student to accelerate academic progress at a greater pace than he or she experienced in his or her previous school setting.

Oftentimes, it takes more than one year to remediate a multiple year academic deficiency. In many cases we are supporting students who have been educationally traumatized and the charter school must heal severe wounds before the student can begin to achieve academic gains.

I invite members of the committee and members of each panel to visit CCA to witness a high-quality public cyber charter school in operation. Such a visit would allow everyone to better understand the infrastructure, comprehensive systems, and overall operations of a statewide entity prior to suggesting statutory changes.

These are complicated issues that require in-depth examination, which is why we encourage and support the formation of a comprehensive charter school funding commission to allow sufficient time and resources to adequately examine these issues.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify before the committee.

I look forward to addressing any questions you may have.



## ANNUAL EXPENSES UNIQUE TO CYBER CHARTER SCHOOLS



Cyber charter schools are required to enroll school-age children from across Pennsylvania and must meet their needs regardless of where in Pennsylvania the child resides.

In addition to regular and special education programs and services, Commonwealth Charter Academy also provides support and assistance to students and families.

While some of these costs are mandated by law, Commonwealth Charter Academy goes above and beyond to ensure that students and their families receive a high-quality education.



*\*Based on actual audited figures for the 2017-2018 school year.*

# Commonwealth Charter Academy's Special Education Program

As required by state and federal laws and regulations, CCA – a public cyber charter school – provides comprehensive, personalized special education programs and services to students with disabilities.

CCA is committed to ensuring that every student is provided with the support necessary to successfully complete his or her K-12 education.

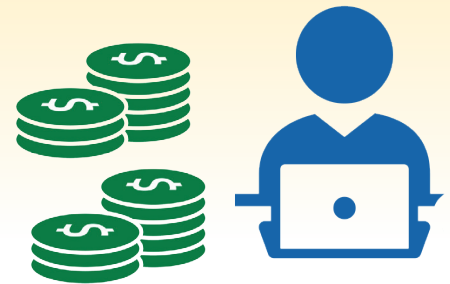
CCA provides extensive special education programs and services, including:

- 100 percent highly qualified, certified professional staff;
- Online and in-person therapy services, such as speech, occupational and physical therapy, and behavior, vision, hearing and social skills support;
- Assistive technology, such as the Read Live, Dragon NaturallySpeaking, Learning Ally and WYNN;
- Research-based program intended for non-verbal students with autism; and
- Residential placement programs.

## **Special Education Expenses\***



**9,026** students were enrolled in CCA of which, **nearly 1,800**, or **20 percent**, received **special education services**.



Educational costs for students who received **special education services** totaled **\$42.1 million**, an average of **\$23,555 per student**.



Although **1,800 special education students** accounted for nearly **20 percent** of CCA's enrollment, **35 percent** of CCA's expenditures were absorbed by these students.



Of the **1,800 students** who received **special education services**, nearly **400 students** received services at a combined cost of **\$15.1 million**, or an average of **\$38,000 per student**.



**82 students** received services in excess of **\$50,000**, with services for **five students** exceeding **\$100,000**.

*\* Based on actual audited figures for the 2016-17 school year.*

# GRADE-LEVEL PERFORMANCE FOR NEWLY ENROLLED STUDENTS - FALL 2018

Of the students who newly enrolled in Commonwealth Charter Academy (CCA) in Fall 2018:

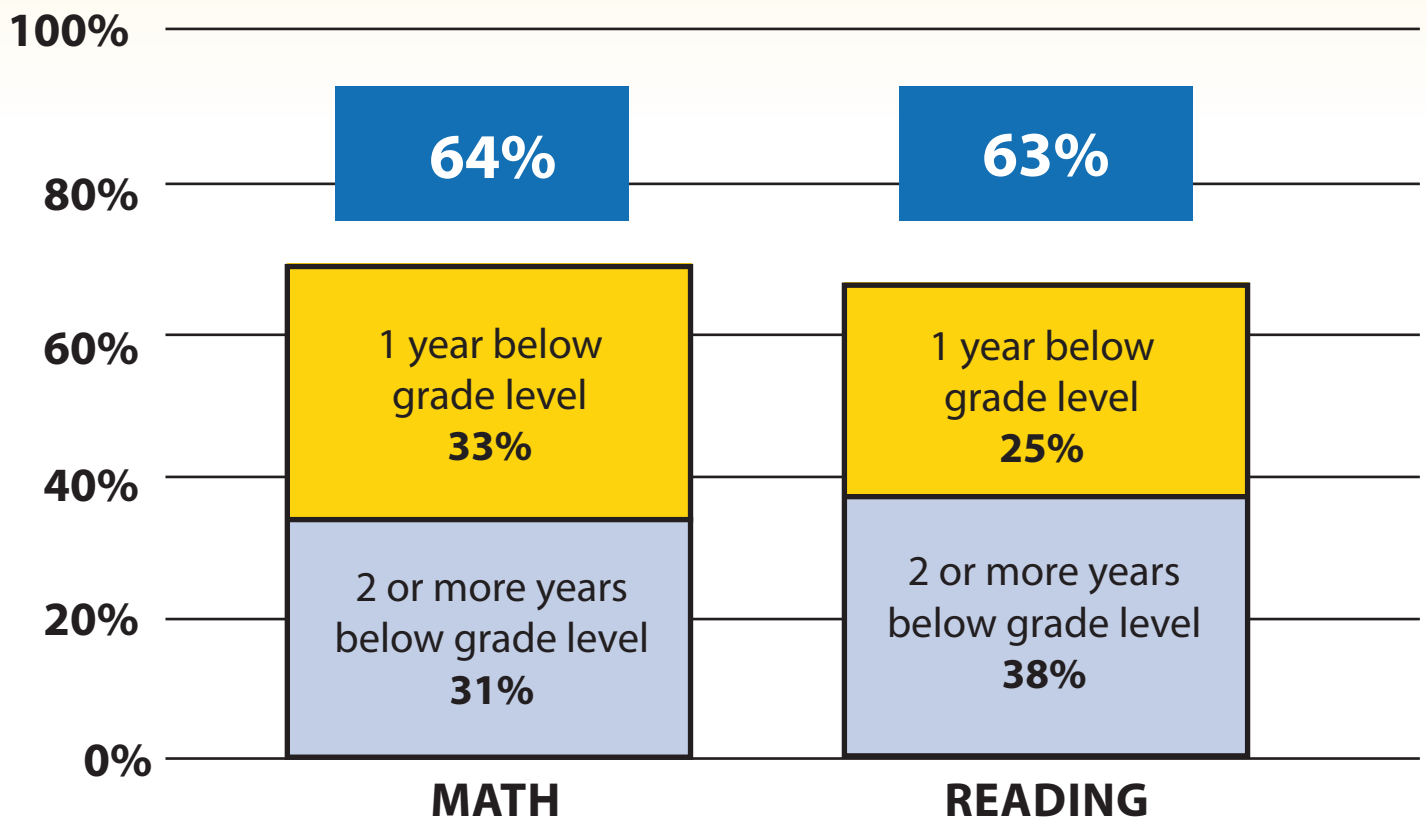
- **64 percent of newly enrolled students are one or more years below grade level in math, and**
- **63 percent of newly enrolled students are one or more years below grade level in reading.**

CCA educators work with the student and his or her family to put into place comprehensive remedial services to assist the student in making up their academic deficiencies as quickly as possible.

Oftentimes, depending on the academic deficiency of the student, this can take one or more years to resolve.

CCA administers the *i-Ready Diagnostics* assessment three times each year (fall, winter and spring) to provide teachers with information to determine a student's academic performance and growth as well as insight into each student's unique needs.

In the process of administering the *i-Ready Diagnostics*, CCA has identified that nearly two thirds of first-time students were severely academically deficient, with nearly 33 percent two or more years behind in math and nearly 40 percent two or more years behind in reading.

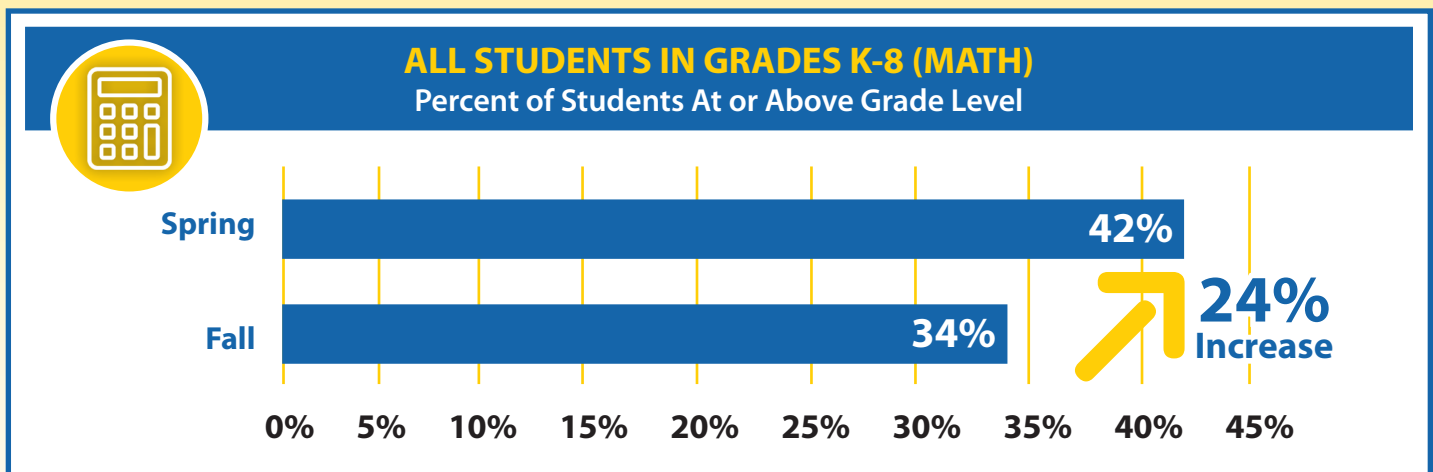


# COMMONWEALTH CHARTER ACADEMY

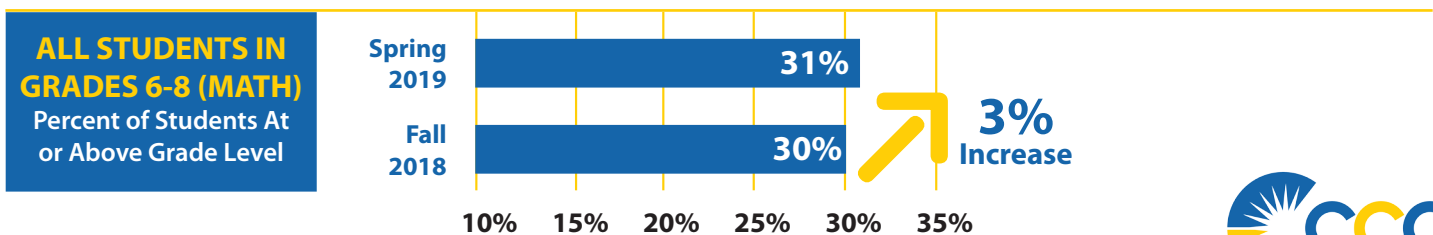
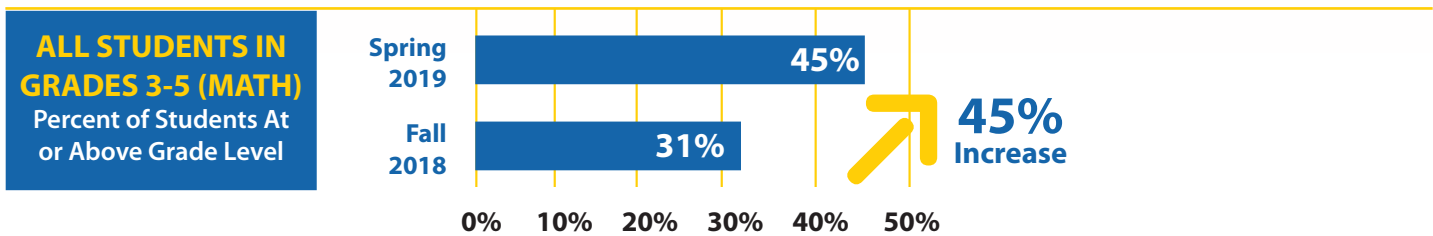
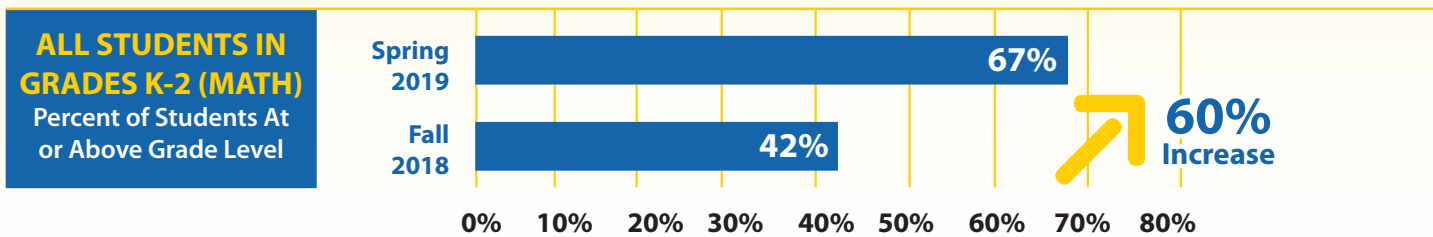
## 2018-19 School Year: Grades K-8 Academic Growth Based on the Math i-Ready Diagnostic Assessment

To ensure academic programs are rigorous and provide students with a high-quality education, Commonwealth Charter Academy (CCA) administers the i-Ready Diagnostic Assessment – a nationally recognized adaptive assessment that identifies students’ strengths and weaknesses, measures growth, and supports data-driven differentiated instruction – to determine each students’ academic performance three times during the school year: fall, winter and spring.

The below graphs show the percentage of students performing at or above grade level in the subject of Math on the Fall 2018 assessment and the Spring 2019 assessment.



### Breakdown of students performing at or above grade level by grade bands.





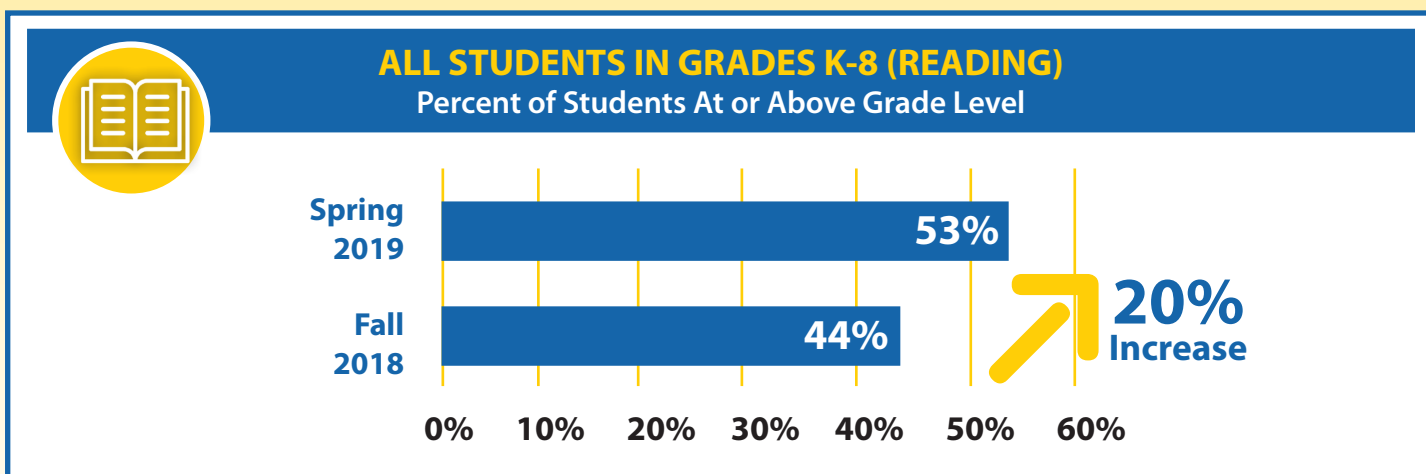
# COMMONWEALTH CHARTER ACADEMY

## 2018-19 School Year: Grades K-8 Academic Growth

### Based on the Reading *i-Ready Diagnostic Assessment*

To ensure academic programs are rigorous and provide students with a high-quality education, Commonwealth Charter Academy (CCA) uses the i-Ready Diagnostic Assessment – a nationally recognized adaptive assessment that identifies students’ strengths and weaknesses, measures growth, and supports data-driven differentiated instruction – to determine each students’ academic performance three times during the school year: fall, winter and spring.

The below graphs show the percentage of students performing at or above grade level in Reading on the Fall 2018 assessment and the Spring 2019 assessment.



**Breakdown of students performing at or above grade level by grade bands.**

