

Senate Education Hearing
AACSC Testimony
April 19, 2021

Hello, my name is Dr. Penny Nixon and I am speaking to you today on behalf of the African American Charter School Coalition (AACSC) which is made up of African American founded and led public charter school founders, leader, and parents whose children attend these schools with the purpose of ending systemic bias and racism in public education and creating a non-biased system of charter oversight, renewal, and expansion for Black founded and led schools.

Our Coalition collectively represents approximately 20 brick and mortar school locations and over 15,000 children and working class families who reside within the city of Philadelphia. Although, these families are city residents, many times, the parents of the children who attend these schools feel like they are aren't being heard or supported by the stakeholders who represent them.

The schools within our Coalition represent not only high quality and culturally focused education programs for scholars, but they also serve as an economic engine for the communities they are in. Our schools support many small black owned businesses and vendors. Over 50% of our teachers are minority compared to our local district which is around 30%. Over 96% of our student population is Black compared to the district which is around 62%. And 98% of the students we serve are from low-income households.

Despite having high quality academic programs that celebrate a child's culture and heritage, there are inequities that exist between white and black led schools when it comes to keeping schools open, expanding, funding opportunities, resources, and support. These biases are evidenced through alarming statistics such as, Black charters making up approximately 19% of the charter community in Philadelphia but account for about 87% of all recommendations for closure or non-renewal.

The School District of Philadelphia's Board of Education and Charter School Office (CSO) has a systemic culture of bias and discrimination that has been in the office for over 10 years and is still very present today.

Therefore, we have launched the Black Schools Matter campaign which is our effort to correct misinformation that has been spread about Black founded and led public charter schools and to hold all of our stakeholders accountable to not only ensure our scholars and parents feel like they do matter, but to also create a more fair and equitable system of oversight, renewal, and expansion for our schools.

As part of the Black Schools Matter campaign, we are also advocating for many public charter school reforms that we would like to share with you today:

- 1) We are advocating to be formally recognized by our local School District and our State, acknowledging that African American founded and led public charter schools need to be a permanent part of the educational landscape here in the Commonwealth - similarly to the same way we have historically founded Black colleges and universities also known as HBCU's, that permanent option should be available to families who want to attend a historically Black public school (HBPS).
- 2) Expansion opportunities should be fairly distributed among white and Black led schools which is not the case today. Two years ago, a Black founded and led school submitted an application for expansion in Philadelphia but it was not granted while all other white led schools who requested an expansion during that same time period were approved. The District never even had the courtesy to formally respond to the school applicant that requested the expansion. How is that allowed to happen? That is not a fair process.

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- 3) We believe the evaluation during renewal is flawed, biased and inequitable and that our local district and CSO should not be recommending African American charter schools for closure or non-renewal until this process can be fully investigated and thoroughly reexamined by an independent body. An example of the inequity that exists is with one of my schools - the only school in my cohort of 18 schools last year to be voted for non-renewal during a global pandemic - despite outperforming some of the schools who were renewed. The CSO has also attempted to negotiate based on whether some of our schools would be willing to reduce their enrollment and return some of the students to the district. A CSO staff person actually stated to one of our Coalition school leaders, "if you give us back some of your students, we'll approve your move to a new location." That is not only inequitable, it sounds illegal. Yet, these are the types of things happening at the local level.
- 4) We believe one way to ensure fairness and equity in this process is the establishment of an independent authorizer that is responsible for the evaluation, oversight, and renewals of public charter schools. AACSC would like to have a seat at the table when the legislature updates the charter law to ensure our Coalition has a voice and input in the process so we can remove loop holes that exist which allow the CSO to operate in a way that doesn't provide transparency and consistency with how they oversee and evaluate schools in Philadelphia. When you have the Chair of a local school board publicly stating that she doesn't believe charter schools can educate children, you are starting out with a biased perspective before you have a chance to be fairly evaluated because of a board members' personal belief system in the process and that is unfair and totally unacceptable.
- 5) There has been significant conversation about cuts for special education funding for charters to the tune of \$99 Million. If the Governor wants to save money on special education funding, he should force Intermediate Units (IU) to provide services for all public schools which is what they are organized to do. Going to an IU allows charter schools to access technical assistance and purchase special needs services at a reduced rate but in Philadelphia, we are not able to go to our county IU for services. The Philadelphia IU has not served Philadelphia's charter school students, despite being funded in part by those students. Philadelphia public charter schools are forced to go to other counties for the same services Philadelphia should be providing. In some cases, our schools must engage with private vendors to access these services at an increased cost. Therefore we believe Philadelphia's Intermediate Unit (IU) 26 needs to be reorganized so all Philadelphia public charter schools are able to receive services and have representation in a manner similar to other districts.
- 6) Finally, we believe given the current system that is in place regarding oversight at the district level, we must have a fully functional Charter Appeals Board also known as CAB so when public charter schools come before the CAB, they are able to not only hear the appeal being made by a school but also take action - if necessary - to address the grievances being made by schools.

Thank you Senator Martin and fellow members of the Senate Education Committee for giving us an opportunity to share our education reform recommendations with you. We welcome you to come to Philadelphia to visit our schools to see how we educate our students. We also hope to work with you to address the issues we raised today and implement the changes necessary to create a more fair and equitable system for all students and working class families in our Commonwealth.

Thank you.