



AVON GROVE CHARTER SCHOOL

Excellence through Ingenuity

**PA Senate Education Committee
Public Hearing
April 12, 2021**

**Testimony of Kristen Bishop, CEO
Avon Grove Charter School**

Good morning Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Kristen Bishop, and I am the CEO at Avon Grove Charter School. I'm also a member of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for allowing me to share my reflections and feedback as a public charter school leader. I believe educational reforms and changes to PA's Charter School Law are needed to ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education.

Avon Grove Charter School (AGCS) opened in 2002 and currently educates 1,865 students in kindergarten through 12th grade in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania. We have two campuses: our Main Campus, for grades 4-12, is located in the small town of West Grove, and our Early Learning Center, for grades K-3, is nearby in Kemblesville. We employ 224 people in the surrounding area. AGCS is an innovative, college-preparatory, public charter school with a neighborhood feel. Ours is a nurturing environment where every child is well known and cared for by our team. We focus on the whole child - - offering an academically rigorous curriculum with differentiated learning opportunities for each student, combined with social-emotional well-being programs for solid character development. AGCS is so much more than an outstanding school for children - - we are a family.

Parents choose a public charter school for a variety of reasons, and I encourage you to speak with charter school families in your districts to learn why they made the switch. Families that choose AGCS do so for the intimate neighborhood environment - rather than our large local school districts - promoting a smaller community of learners. Avon Grove School District, our local authorizer, has a good reputation. Unlike most charters and their authorizing districts, we have a positive relationship with the Avon Grove School District, and our entire community benefits from that mutual respect. I find attempts to pit public charter schools against local school districts disappointing and detrimental. At a time when schools should be working together to overcome a global pandemic and support every student, perpetuating the unhealthy competition between school districts and public charter schools only divides communities, and children suffer. The public charter school community would rather work together with school districts to find ways - locally and at the state level - to improve outcomes for every student. We believe that comprehensive, fair reforms to PA's Charter School Law will benefit both school districts and public charter schools.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Is accountability necessary? Absolutely, however, educating children involves more than success on a standardized test. I have seen students grow and achieve using different educational approaches. Our test scores are currently on par or better than our sending school districts, but children are more than test scores. Student achievement and growth can and should be measured in various ways. State legislators, families, and taxpayers need to see fair comparisons between public charter schools and the school districts they pull students from. PA's public charter schools enroll students who are often several grade levels behind and dealing with social/emotional issues. Comparing these schools with the highest performing district schools in our state where students have all the advantages that money can buy is not a fair or accurate comparison. At AGCS, we work extremely hard to ensure every student is supported in all aspects of their development, and a grade could never measure my staff's success on a standardized test.

I've worked in public charter schools for over 20 years in both urban and rural areas in Pennsylvania, and the debate over charter schools continues to this day. Governor Wolf says charter schools need accountability. I believe all public schools in PA - charter schools and school districts - need to be accountable to the children they serve and the taxpayers who fund them. Suppose we focus on holding all schools responsible for student achievement and funding. In that case, we will produce numerous essential benefits, such as expanded educational options for students, increased innovation by educators, improved student achievement, and healthy competitive pressure for all public schools. I find it interesting that Governor Wolf has called public charter school accountability into question. Is it because we are held to higher standards than school districts? PA's public charter schools must adhere to all the same state and federal reporting requirements as school districts, but we also must provide our local district with an annual report of our operations, and every five years, we must endure a rigorous renewal process. Most importantly, PA's public charter schools are accountable to the families we serve. At any time, they can choose to leave us if we are not providing a high-quality learning environment for their children. The same cannot be said for school districts in which students are forced to attend based on their home address.

While there continues to be calls for increased accountability for PA's public charter schools, there is virtually no accountability for our authorizers and the state department of education to follow the Charter School Law. The law outlines the process for new charter schools to be approved/denied and the process for renewals, but there is currently no mechanism to hold our authorizers (local school districts for brick-and-mortar charters and the PA Department of Education (PDE) for cyber charters) accountable if they don't follow the mandatory processes. Some of my brick-and-mortar colleagues are required by their authorizers to jump through excessive hoops in order to obtain their renewals, some are even pressured into accepting enrollment caps. Both brick-and-mortar charters and cyber charter schools are also at the mercy of their authorizer in terms of when a renewal will be granted. 11 of PA's 14 public cyber charter

schools are operating with expired charter agreements because PDE refuses to act on their paperwork and yet Governor Wolf, who has control over the Department, says that public charter schools are the ones who are unaccountable. We need changes to the Charter School Law that standardize the application, renewal and amendment process to ensure fair and equitable treatment is given to charter school operators across the state.

FUNDING

You can never talk about public education and not have someone bring up funding. I've seen funding levels vary year to year, but at no time have I ever seen public charter schools funded more than their neighboring public school districts. Charter schools have been asked to do more with less for as long as I've worked in them. When we run out of space or need more money for programming, we have to fundraise or wait several years to take out a bond to support projects. At no time can we raise taxes or increase our tuition rates to build programs or support building structures. The tuition reimbursement we receive is based on the amount spent by each student's home district the previous year. This can be a challenge for us. School districts must provide charter schools and PDE with student tuition rates in August of each year utilizing the PDE-363 document. However, some school districts don't submit this form until much later in the year, or not at all, forcing us to estimate our rates and planning for the worst-case scenario year to year. This is not how any school should have to budget.

We can all agree that public school funding should be evaluated. However, I believe fair funding and oversight should be applied to public charter schools and public school districts. Oversight needs to be drastically reformed for all public school districts and public charter schools. All failing school districts and charter schools should be held accountable for poor financial mismanagement.

One of our sending school districts has been mismanaged for years. They refuse to make their state-mandated charter tuition payments to us, which leaves us at the mercy of PDE to redirect the money and make the payment. PDE, which testified recently that they process 14,000 redirection requests each year, now takes liberties with processing some of those requests. A fellow charter school had to spend precious resources last year taking the district and PDE to court in order to receive months of tuition reimbursement they were owed. Thankfully, the courts ruled in the charter school's favor and the school was able to continue serving their students but it disrupted their learning environment and diverted already limited resources away from the classroom. Now, we have to deal with not getting paid and guessing how much each month will trickle into our budget. We are in the business of educating children and no business should have to operate this way, especially when it comes to students.

It is imperative to reiterate; charter schools are held to the same fiscal accountability to PDE and local taxpayers as school districts. There is budgetary accountability for all Pennsylvania public schools, including charter schools, and Avon Grove Charter School takes this responsibility seriously.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Each child in a public school setting deserves an equitable share of federal, state and local funding and no student should fear a reduction in services because a politician has deemed them less important than their peers. That is exactly what Governor Wolf is proposing, to the tune of a \$99 million cut to charter school students receiving special education services. I understand special education identification is being discussed, because that is how the funding is calculated, but that is only part of the equation. Everyone wants to talk about speech therapy identification, but no one wants to discuss outplacements that can cost charter schools up to \$120,000 a year. AGCS has supported students that have entered our school system with special education supports, whether identified by the school district, county, or another charter school. We will continue to identify students requiring special education services because a failure to do so would be negligent and illegal. We trust the professionals completing these comprehensive evaluations, many of whom have not only dedicated their time to AGCS but neighboring districts as well. Our special education and funding processes are all audited by the state and publicly available on PDE's website. In fact, the current Acting Secretary and the previous Secretary of Education were both asked during Appropriations hearings if PDE had identified any inappropriate behavior by public charter schools in identifying and/or educating special education students. Neither were able to identify any improper behavior.

At no time does AGCS cherry-pick students from our lottery. When our enrollment office receives an application, the student is placed in the lottery database. The students are selected through our electronic system on a random, unbiased basis.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that it is not in the best interest of students to cut any funding for any public school student. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we all need to be working together to ensure every student is set-up for success. I have seen the public charter school community ask for a seat at the table for years and repeatedly ignored. Public charter schools educate many students and these students deserve equitable funding. I support an independent, bipartisan, bicameral funding commission spearheaded by the General Assembly to study all aspects of public school funding and collaborate on a plan that funds students and not institutions.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Forward Together,
Kristen Bishop
CEO & Parent
Avon Grove Charter School

