

PA Senate Education Committee Hearing

Testimony of Sharon Sedlar, Parent

April 23, 2021

Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Sharon Sedlar, and I am a resident of a small, family-oriented borough in Southwestern Pennsylvania. I welcome the opportunity to offer my views and impressions of ongoing legislation related to charter school reform, and very much appreciate being a part of the conversation. I offer many thanks to the committee for this concerted and focused approach to this very important topic – education of the children in our Commonwealth.

First, let me offer some background on my family. I have lived in Brentwood Borough, Pennsylvania for 18 years, and have had 6 children involved in Brentwood Borough School District from elementary school through high school. Two of my daughters are now in college in Swanson's School of Engineering at the University of Pittsburgh, two are in high school, one is in middle school, and one is in elementary school. I have been an active participant in my school community as an officer in varying degrees for our middle school PTO, a prominent parent representative to administrators in our district, and a dedicated School Board Meeting attendee. I have experience in varied educational experiences both pre and post-COVID - in our public district schooling, district-offered cyber-schooling, and cyber charter schooling outside of the district for my children.

When we first moved to Brentwood Borough, my children attended a nearby catholic elementary school; however, due to the inability of the school to offer specialized, GATE level programming, we moved them to Moore Elementary School. They had wonderful opportunities and teachers for years while in the district, but circumstances changed for our children, particularly in the elementary school. I started to notice, about 6 years ago with retirement of a few administrators and tightening budgets that resulted in the loss of the Social Worker, that students were starting to have more difficulties from an emotional and psychological perspective. Classrooms became overcrowded and improperly controlled. My own child, a happy and bouncy 3rd grader, started to have abdominal migraines and dreaded going to school due to a chaotic classroom environment. She and a few other gifted/enrichment students would be moved to the hallway so that they could concentrate appropriately. Over the next two grades, classroom dynamics and symptoms did improve, but never completely resolved.

As my 5th grader was finishing her time at this particular school, another one of my (younger) children also attended the elementary school, and began to have similar symptoms. My (then) 2nd grader did not want to attend school any longer; but due to the administration warnings about absences and potential magistrate referral, I felt I had no choice but to send her. After a few months, in the interests of cooperation and reaching for any solution, an SAP (Student Assistance Program) Plan was suggested and agreed upon, but resulted in no success. Her condition further degraded, and she refused to attend school completely a few months later. She had tried for six months to do as she was asked – as did I – but district-directed efforts were unsuccessful. They were not able to provide for my daughter's needs. She now has a 504 Plan due to Anxiety and, to this day, at any suggestion of going back into a brick-and-mortar setting, debilitating symptoms resurface. My daughter attended two cyber charter schools for

the balance of 2nd and then 3rd grade, then participated in our district's asynchronous cyber program for 4th grade. (I wanted to give the district's program a chance, as my other children were still traditional district students.) The program was somewhat successful, but still didn't provide what I felt my child needed.

Being such a small school district with only about 1,200 total students, resources are very limited and competition for those resources is high; over seventy percent of the total district budget is spent on salary and benefits alone. The teachers work tremendously hard (and many go far above and beyond) to educate our students, but there is only so much they can do. As such, and for multiple additional reasons, the district-provided cyber program was grossly sub-standard. No teacher interaction or peer interaction was provided. I constantly requested confirmation that the cyber curriculum aligned with the district curriculum, as I was trying to establish a baseline knowledge for the time when my child would hopefully rejoin the district one day, but assistance in this area was very limited due to district contractual issues. Only classes provided via the computer media through Accelerate Education for elementary school, or Seneca Valley for high school, were permitted. The district was adamantly opposed to any synchronous platform. In conversations with a school official, I asked specifically if any video time with teachers was being considered. I was told that the perception was "That's what in-person school is for...and we already offer that." In the elementary district cyber program in particular, it left much to be desired and was the only barest of programs.

When COVID hit last year, I knew that my school district would not be able to provide services in a manner acceptable to me, as the school board had deferred student-centered technology funding for years. These issues, combined with the ever-increasing bullying, peer-pressure and secular influence created a need to seek education elsewhere.

As I mentioned before, I was a constant attendee of School Board Meetings – frequently, the only parent; at times, the only person other than the Board Members at all. I had spoken out on numerous subjects such as the ones referenced above. I had respectfully and cooperatively spoken with Administrators, the Special Education Coordinator, the Superintendent, and School Board Members over the years, and little has ever come of it. School Board Meeting notes are cursory, and requests for video transmitted School Board Meetings during this pandemic have consistently been denied. I could not trust a district that I felt lacked in transparency.

I searched for an alternative program that was more of a blend of synchronous and asynchronous – one that didn't tie my children to the computer screen all day, but provided depth of curriculum, structure, interesting and varied electives, and teacher/peer interaction. I have found what has been the perfect solution in Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School.

One very noticeable difference is in the level of communication and access to fairly immediate student information, feedback and grades. Our charter cyber school already has in place the infrastructure necessary to promote very effective and timely communication between administrators, parents, peers, teachers and students using an online platform. Requesting a teacher's conference for parents or special lesson help is easily accomplished, as is the quickly-scheduled zoom call. The response time to emails is usually within an hour or two for both students and parents, if not within minutes.

I am so very glad that I had a need to examine other options. As a result, my children are happier, more challenged academically, and have been offered courses not previously possible such as Forensic

Science, Business Law, Anatomy and Physiology, Consumer Mathematics, AP Micro and Macroeconomics, Mythology, Public Speaking, Astronomy, Marine Science, Journalism, and many others. Because our ability to choose, PALCS has provided us with the ability to grow closer as a family, and as such our closely-held values can be better supported and maintained.

Our cyber charter school experience has inspired a love of learning and hope for the future for a very young child who was paralyzed by the prospect of any teacher interaction, and dreaded the thought of stepping foot on school grounds or attending any school event without her mother. *The school district environment caused this – hard work, cyber schooling, and the support of PALCS is repairing it.* My now 5th grader is actually open to “attending school” (meaning in person) in high school. What a HUGE step for her! This is further proof that the ability to make a choice is crucial for families, and *children can be saved* by the ability of the parents to select the educational program they feel is right for their child.

In terms of the upcoming legislation, I would submit that reform is a good thing if properly applied as it pertains to transparency, accountability, and auditing authority among them. I particularly agree that School Boards should be elected, and not appointed. But reducing and restricting cyber charter payments any further than they are currently is discriminatory. Some of the proposed “reform” would cut funding to the cyber charter school that I have chosen in the best interests of my children, with increased education monies going to a school district that doesn’t even serve them. Not only does the proposal cut “tuition” to the cyber charter school, it requires the cyber charter school to reimburse the district for extra-curricular costs – reimbursement to a school that is already holding back a portion of cyber charter tuition for fixed expenses. This further takes educational funding away from the cyber charter, and away from my children’s education. That hardly seems fair.

My school district averages approximately \$18,300 per student in expenditures. One charter reform proposal would provide \$9,500 to our chosen cyber charter school (our actual educators), with \$8,800 (ALMOST HALF) being kept by the school district should expenditures remain at that same level – the very one that *failed my children in the first place*. If our choice of public school is working so perfectly for my child, why should that school be penalized simply because it uses a different platform?

Another charter reform proposal would “force” parents to either enroll their child in the district’s cyber program (if one is offered), or pay for the “tuition” of a cyber charter school should they choose to educate outside of the district. As you have seen in my district, the cyber offering is via an asynchronous model, and in no way compares to what we are receiving via PALCS (2 synchronous lessons per week for elementary students, scheduled lesson help daily, books and workbooks as needed, and a multitude of virtual resources). As a matter of fact, just a few days ago in planning for this coming new school year, I contacted my district about the possibility of offering a virtual program; after all, it would make sense to do so considering the programming already underway due to COVID. However, I was told that, as the district was focused on 4 day return to school, this decision had not yet been made, and no further information was available. This is very disconcerting.

If my district were able to provide the depth of curriculum that is offered in our cyber charter program, I would seriously consider joining the district program, for the chance for my children to “attend” school with their peers, the same children with whom they participate in extra-curricular activities and consider friends in our neighborhood. However, the program with which the district traditionally “supports” virtual programming is far below acceptable standards. Passing the proposed legislation, forcing all children to attend their school district’s far inferior (and in some cases hastily thrown together and half-

hearted) cyber program, is not consistent with keeping the child's educational well-being in the center of the discussion.

I have tried to work with my home school district for years, but the situation is currently such that our family has been left with no other option than to seek cyber charter schooling elsewhere. This proposed charter school reform would have a profound effect – in some cases, sending children back to a school district that has failed them in the past – to a school district that has proven that they are not able to listen to those they are supposed to serve and provide what the parents feel are adequate services and education for their children. That is not right. That is not fair. That is not keeping that child in the center of the room.

PALCS has earned my trust and works very hard to earn its funding for its students. Please allow my children this refuge, and me as their parent the ability to **choose** what is best for them. Should my home school district change and improve to be comparable with our cyber charter educational experience, I would consider returning – but that is support that the district *must earn from me*.

Now is not the time to cut funding for cyber charter options that are working for so many of our children and families. Let the pandemic dust settle, make the cyber legislation apply to ALL programs – those offered by districts AND those outside the district. Let the parents and children be the voice for change – not politics and institutions. Build it from the child in the center of the room up, and not from the “top down” perspective. This time of unprecedented and quickly changing pandemic currents is still uncertain and things must calm before building anew. This is not the time to take away an option that has worked so well for our children and our family.

I welcome the opportunity to speak with you further should you feel it would be of benefit. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Sharon Sedlar