



CHARTER SCHOOL OF
EXCELLENCE

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Good morning, Chairman Senator Scott Martin, Chairwoman Lindsey Williams, and distinguished Senate Education Committee Members.

My name is Dr. Renee Gordon. I am the Chief Administrative Officer at The Charter School of Excellence in Erie, PA. I have been with my school for over 15 years. It's my pleasure to represent our school community whenever I can to highlight the good work that we do for our students and the positive impact of charter schools. Thank you for the opportunity to testify virtually before the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee today on behalf of my school and the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, of which my school is a member.

I am here today to talk about why, much like many other educators and parents around the Commonwealth, I oppose the proposed Regulation #6-349 on charter and cyber charter schools. Like them, I oppose for many reasons.

We often say that K-12 education in our state promotes the best interests of all children in Pennsylvania, and yet this proposed regulation picks winners and losers in the public education system, and public charter school students lose the most. It does this in a variety of ways.

For example, the proposed regulation seeks to make it harder for charter schools like mine to prompt the Department of Education to ensure that tuition payments that should go to students at my school get there in a timely fashion. Each year, there are thousands of incidents where tuition payments for disadvantaged students gets held up in a bureaucratic mess that ends up involving attorneys' fees and a cumbersome litigative process. This money does not go towards the children that need it the most. The proposed regulation will make it even harder for money that is allocated for my students to actually get to my school and other schools across Pennsylvania.

Even when this regulation seems to have the right outlook on the issues, it is still wrong in its redundancy and overreach. For example, the regulation seeks to put into place standards for ethics and auditing in the spirit of accountability to taxpayers. However, charter schools are public schools, and therefore are held to the same levels of accountability as district schools. Further, the General Assembly, through passing bills out of the Education Committee in the House for 2 consecutive sessions, has shown to approach reform with the voice of Pennsylvania's people in concert with them. That process allows for the legislative process to address the best interests of all impacted by changing in policy.

The issue of charter reform is a complex one, with a history of political axes to grind and supporters to appease. And yet, the majority of Pennsylvania's charter school students come from underserved communities, where everything from the local economy to the status quo education system has failed them repeatedly for years. The regulations reinforce that notion by constraining schools like mine from operating with innovation, collaboration, and empowerment. They seek to make charter schools act more like public district schools, just without the same amount of taxing authority that school districts have, the same amount of tuition per student that school districts receive, and the same amount of leeway that school districts receive should they fail.

The best way to work through this for the sake of kids like those I have spent my career serving is to have the collective voice of the people work through these difficult challenges together. That can only be done through the Pennsylvania General Assembly. These proposed regulations should be rescinded and any potential reforms to charter schools should be reviewed and voted on by the legislature and signed into law by the governor. Thirty days to review and comment on a proposed regulation is hardly enough time for all of us to understand the unintended consequences. And sadly, people like me would be left to deal with those unintended consequences. And even sadder still, the students I serve would be the main ones paying the price for those consequences, because throughout the history of public education, they always are the ones paying the price for any unintended consequence.

Until the General Assembly can resolve these matters with legislation, the comment period for the regulation should be extended, and regulators should take the time to hear directly from Pennsylvania's families and students with statewide listening sessions.

I invite each of you on the Committee to visit my school, The Charter School of Excellence, and see the great work we are doing for our students, our community, and ultimately the entire state.

Thank you and I look forward to the question-and-answer session.

Dr. Renee Gordon

Chief Administrative Officer

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