

**Senate Education Committee Hearing on Educational Opportunity and
Accountability Act (Senate Bill) - May 13, 2015**

**Testimony of Dr. William R. Hite, Jr., Superintendent,
School District of Philadelphia**

Good morning, my name is Bill Hite, and I am the Superintendent of The School District of Philadelphia.

Thank you, Senator Smucker, and your colleagues on the Senate Education Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

The School District and School Reform Commission (SRC) want to commend you for introducing legislation focusing on turning around chronically underperforming schools. We fully support that goal and it is a core component of our updated strategic plan, Action Plan 3.0.

From my vantage point, Senate Bill 6 implicates both a lack of will and a lack of resources and tools to successfully turn around chronically underperforming schools.

Let me assure you, we do not lack the will in Philadelphia to own up to and take bold action to turn around our struggling schools. We do, however, lack both the resources and some of the flexibilities needed to pursue that work in a way that is not to the detriment of a broader group of students and schools.

More accountability for failing schools is needed. Furthermore, it is appropriate to demand more results for more funding. For Philadelphia, the most effective approach to achieve those twin goals is to: (1) build upon the successful turnaround efforts underway, including by maintaining local oversight of turnaround; (2) require the urgent, focused expansion of that work; and (3) provide the financial support for additional school turnaround.

In my remarks today, I want to:

- provide the Committee with context about what we are working on in Philadelphia;
- share some background information about the turnaround approaches already underway;
- highlight upcoming initiatives we think will help accelerate our turnaround efforts; and
- discuss ways in which the pending legislation could impact that work.

1. The Philadelphia Context

We say that public education is a civil right owed to our children and should be the great equalizer. But if we are honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that we are failing too many of our children; that geography too often is destiny; and that the child in North Philly is getting nothing close to the opportunity afforded to the child in Rittenhouse Square, much less Lower Merion.

Our urgent goal at the School District of Philadelphia is to balance the scales – to ensure children’s opportunities for learning and enrichment and mentoring and growth are not dictated by zip code.

Our mantra is simple: **Every child in Philadelphia deserves to have a great public school close to where he or she lives.**

What is a great public school? It is one that provides an interesting and engaging educational experience based on the content knowledge and skills – including critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity – that we know are essential for college and career readiness. It is one where every child with AP or honors program potential has access to those challenging classes. It is one that provides needed social-emotional supports and student health services. And it is one that offers the full suite of art and music, sports, and afterschool enrichment.

A school system cannot negate the effects of poverty and trauma, but it can – it must – give each child the opportunity to be educated well and to have a real chance at success after graduation.

In service of that goal, we have made hard choices – closing 24 schools, reducing central office staffing by 40%, eliminating thousands of positions, negotiating several concessionary labor contracts – and made some steady progress over the past three years.

Our schools are safer, with reduced suspensions and zero schools on the state’s “Persistently Dangerous” list. Student attendance is up. We have opened new, neighborhood-based, innovative high schools. A citywide effort is helping young students learn to read. We have implemented staffing approaches that allow us to best match teacher talents with student and school needs, no longer using seniority as the sole factor in any decision-making. We have aligned our curriculum to the rigorous PA Core Standards and supported teachers in improving instruction. We have revamped our teacher and principal hiring strategies, enabling us to better compete for the most talented staff. More and more schools have engaged parents and “Friends of” groups.

But we are nowhere close to where we want to be. Academic performance is far, far too low. Outcomes are not close to equitable. Most schools – and particularly those

in our neighborhoods most challenged by poverty – lack anywhere near adequate staffing and materials.

If our first year was about stabilizing a precarious system, and our second was focused on setting ambitious student learning goals and aligning resources in support of those goals, our third year and beyond will be about ensuring that every child benefits equally from those resources. We have a new statement of goals and values, Action Plan 3.0, that lays out how it will happen.

Before delving into the turnaround-related details of our plan, I want to provide some background information about the turnaround work already underway in Philadelphia.

2. Ongoing Turnaround Efforts

Over the past five years, dating back to the 2010-11 school year, most of Philadelphia's turnaround work has been within the "Renaissance Schools Initiative" launched by then-Superintendent Dr. Arlene Ackerman.

The Renaissance Initiative included two turnaround approaches – District-managed Promise Academies, based on the federal turnaround model, and charter-operated Renaissance Charter Schools, based on the federal restart model.

In the Promise Academy model, schools were required to turn over at least 50% of the teaching staff. At least initially, Promise Academies were required to implement a longer school day and week, and received additional resources and supports from the School District.

In the Renaissance Charter School model, schools continue to serve the existing student population in the same school building, and must enroll students from a defined neighborhood catchment area, but otherwise operate with relative autonomy from the School District. Most charter operators replace the majority of school staff.

As of this year, we have 20 Renaissance Charter Schools, serving close to 16,000 students, and 12 Promise Academies, serving approximately 7,500 students.

Five years in, there are both strengths to build on and areas for improvement in the Renaissance Initiative.

First, the strengths:

A December 2013 report by the School District's Office of Research and Evaluation examining the performance of the first 17 Renaissance Charter Schools on academic and climate measures showed impressive results:

- 13 of the 17 schools had improved reading scores, with 8 of schools showing rapid improvement.
- 12 of the 17 schools had improved math scores, with 11 showing rapid improvement.
- 15 of the 17 schools reported fewer serious incidents among their student populations. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of Renaissance Charter Schools improved student retention.

A review last year of all 20 Renaissance Charter Schools, which are spread across seven different charter operators, found that the operators with consistently high-performing schools had a common model and structure across all of their schools.

Mastery Charter Schools, which runs seven Renaissance Charter Schools, epitomizes this consistency of implementation. Mastery has achieved notable turnaround and sustained success, posting double-digit gains in academics, reducing violent incidents, and retaining the vast majority of students post-turnaround.

The Promise Academy in-District turnaround schools also experienced significant gains in reading and math proficiency during the first year of implementation, as well as notable progress in school climate.

As one Principal from the first cohort of Promise Academies described it:

The first year was amazing. I was excited, because this was what I got into education for – to help the kids that people write off. Once I was hired I was put on a panel to pick teachers who had passion and believed in education . . . and did whatever it takes for the children. We also had the extended day, the extended year, and we had lots of resources. It was phenomenal.

The Promise Academy model was characterized by increased focus, investment, responsiveness from the Central Administration, and enthusiasm from students, staff, and families.

A evaluation report on the first year of the Renaissance Initiative found that both Renaissance Charter Schools and Promise Academies performed better than comparison schools and that, while there were differences between individual schools, there were no significant differences between the two turnaround types.

And now for the areas of improvement, starting with the Promise Academies:

To be blunt, the School District did not keep its promise to the Promise Academies. Although the model showed early signs of success, its forward momentum was reversed due to underfunding and disrupted implementation.

Just prior to the second year of implementation, close to 200 Promise Academy teachers were laid off, as the District went through the first phase of a series of wrenching budget cuts. Following a union grievance, the lay-offs were in seniority order, resulting in Promise Academies losing many of the staff members they had spend the past year hiring, training, and acclimating to the model.

In addition to staffing upheavals caused by budget cuts, supports to Promise Academy schools were significantly cut for Year Two and key elements of the model were lost, including school-based instructional specialists, reading intervention specialists, one of the extra hours per week, and Saturday School and Summer Academy.

As the District has continued to grapple with a structural deficit in the years since – and to only spend within its allocated resources – Promise Academies have not been restored to their original funding or support level.

Given the number of schools in need of turnaround, and the limited supply of proven external turnaround providers, we recognize the importance of implementing an evidence-based, in-District turnaround model. In consultation with experts, including Mass Insight, we are in the process of revamping the Promise Academy model, which I will describe in more detail shortly.

Improvement is also needed in our Renaissance Charter Schools. The first cohort of Renaissance Charter Schools is up for renewal this spring. Of the seven schools, only four – three operated by Mastery and one operated by Universal – have been recommended for renewal thus far. On Monday evening, the SRC voted to start the non-renewal process for one Renaissance Charter School due primarily to a lack of academic progress post-turnaround.

This highlights both the challenges of turnaround work and the high standards that our Charter Schools Office and the SRC – which have moved aggressively to close non-performing charter schools – are applying to charter oversight work.

Another area for improvement is more purposefully learning from those turnaround schools that are succeeding. We took a significant step in this direction just last month, when we released our system-wide performance measure – the School Progress Report or “SPR” – for the 2013-14 school year. For the first time, close to three-quarters of eligible charter schools (62 of 84) took part in the SPR.

The SPR provides a comprehensive and multi-dimensional measure of how much a school contributes to student learning each year. Each school’s score includes ratings on student achievement, student progress, and school climate. High schools are also evaluated on how well they prepare students for college and careers.

Importantly, the SPR counts student growth more than test performance, and it compares each school’s performance to other schools serving similar students –

what we call “peer groups.” Our peer group leaders included a mix of District-run and charter schools, including one Renaissance Charter School.

We are already taking steps to learn from our successful turnaround partners, including through focus groups, school visits, and shared professional development.

Before turning to upcoming initiatives, I want to highlight a few more turnaround-related efforts underway in Philadelphia.

First, we have seven schools that are launching intensive transformation initiatives this coming school year. Four of these schools developed their own transformation approaches – which range from shifting to an inquiry-driven instructional model to using blended learning tools – through our School Redesign Initiative. Three other schools are implementing the proven Partners in School Innovation transformation approach, which focuses on building the capacity of teachers and leaders and creating a culture of continuous learning and growth for adults and students.

Second, several other schools are completing their first year of turnaround, which includes many of the components used in Lawrence, Massachusetts. All teaching positions in the schools were vacated and the school leaders hired back no more than 50% of the teaching staff. The schools are working with Achievement Network – a non-profit partner Lawrence Public Schools also is using – on implementing school-level data coaching. The schools have modified the school year and school week calendar to support additional tutoring and enrichment for students, and collaborative planning time for teachers.

Importantly – and again mirroring Lawrence – these schools received additional funding, approximately \$500,000 per year for three years from a private grant, to support this work.

Finally, I want to highlight how our recent new charter application process was designed to achieve the goals that appear to underlie the proposed legislation. In the application, we identified priorities for new charter growth. These priorities included committing to serve students from certain geographic areas in which students and families have too few quality options, such as by enrolling students in designated catchment areas. Through this application process, the SRC approved five high-quality charter applications that will result in approximately 3,000 additional seats.

As I hope I have made clear, we are already doing in Philadelphia much of what Senate Bill 6 contemplates as crucial turnaround levers: charter conversion, staff replacement, working with education service providers, focused charter expansion, and school closure.

3. Upcoming Turnaround Initiatives

We know there is much more turnaround work to do. The local and national evidence makes clear that doing this work well requires deep expertise, experience, and sustained focus.

To that end, Action Plan 3.0 announced the formation of a new Turnaround Network, to be headed by an experienced leader, which will bring focused attention to transforming our lowest-performing schools. We will use a diverse provider approach, employing a combination of Renaissance Charter Schools, proven external turnaround providers, and District-run turnaround schools based on and evolving from our Promise Academy model. Schools in the Turnaround Network will be held harmless from additional interventions for three years to allow their turnaround effort to take hold.

In the coming month, we are releasing a Request for Qualifications seeking proposals from a wide range of experienced turnaround providers, including charter schools, contracted operators, and providers of discrete services – for example, professional development, data assessment, climate, or family engagement.

We are rebuilding our Promise Academy model from top to bottom based on evidence and research. We are grounding this effort in the five essential elements of school turnaround: (1) effective leaders; (2) collaborative teachers; (3) strong family and community ties; (4) ambitious instruction; and (5) a safe and orderly learning climate.

Finally, in our funding request to the city and state this year, we have highlighted turnaround as a key priority. We propose to allocate the second-largest share of additional funding to turnaround work, laying the foundation for additional Renaissance Charter Schools to open in School Year 2016-17, as well as to expand or implement other turnaround approaches.

To put it plainly, we are doing turnaround, we want to do more, and we could use your help to do so.

4. Impact of Senate Bill 6 on Turnaround Efforts

In the final section of my testimony, I want to highlight ways in which Senate Bill 6 could support turnaround work in Philadelphia and ways in which it might undermine our turnaround efforts. These comments are organized around three themes: needed operational flexibilities; experienced, high-quality oversight; and appropriate, accountable funding.

a. Needed operational flexibilities

First, the legislation provides some important operational flexibilities to local school districts for use in turning around their lowest-performing schools. Although the impact of this provision on Philadelphia may be limited – the enabling legislation for the School Reform Commission already includes these same powers – these tools may be useful for other school districts. Drawing from our experience in Philadelphia, it might also be helpful if the legislation clarified how these tools interact with, if at all, provisions in existing collective bargaining agreements.

Given what we have learned from successful turnaround efforts – including the value both of extended learning time and collaborative teacher planning time – it may be useful to add some additional tools related to how the school day, week, and year are structured.

With respect to one of the required turnaround approaches for schools transferred to the Achievement School District, I would respectfully submit that rather than mandating the replacement of the principal and at least 50% of the professional staff, the legislation should leave room for school-specific decisions about leadership and teacher turnover.

Another important operational flexibility in the legislation is a streamlined process for closing poor-performing charter schools. The School Reform Commission has taken action over the past several years to close a half-dozen poor-performing charter schools. Unless the charter school voluntarily agrees to close, as has been the case with a few schools, the appeals process can drag on for four or more years, first with the Charter Appeal Board and then with the Commonwealth Court.

Creating a more efficient closure process for poor-performing charter schools would better serve students and families. To achieve the greatest impact, we would urge that this streamlined process be available for all charter schools in the “intervention” category, not just those that are transferred to the Achievement School District.

b. Experienced, high-quality oversight

Turning to the topic of oversight, we strongly support retaining local oversight of turnaround efforts in Philadelphia, including having the Charter Schools Office authorize additional turnaround charter schools.

Our Charter Schools Office is experienced in overseeing turnaround charter schools. It currently oversees 20 Renaissance Charter Schools, as well as 64 non-turnaround charter schools.

Importantly, we have been pursuing a multi-year, comprehensive effort to improve the quality, clarity, transparency, and consistency of our charter school authorizing

practices. This ultimate goal for this work – which we call the Authorizer Quality Initiative or “AQI” – is to ensure that all charter schools authorized by the School Reform Commission are high-quality options for Philadelphia students.

AQI is grounded in three principles – charter school accountability, charter school autonomy, and student and public equity – and has been conducted in three phases.

First, the Charter Schools Office conducted extensive research from around the country and engaged dozens of stakeholders from inside and outside the charter community to develop policies on charter school applications, renewal, monitoring, the Renaissance Charter Schools Initiative, and the responsibilities of the Charter Schools Office. The new policies were approved by the School Reform Commission in April 2014.¹

In the second phase, the Charter Schools Office developed the Charter Performance Framework, a tool used to communicate to charter schools and various stakeholders the plan for assessing a charter school's academic performance, organizational compliance, and financial stewardship over the course of five-year charter agreement. Some areas are reviewed on an annual basis, some are reviewed periodically or based on the discretion of the authorizer, and others are reviewed only at the five-year mark when the SRC must vote on the renewal of a school.

In the third and final phase, the Charter Schools Office is developing a set of improved tools and public-facing documents to support the execution of high-quality authorizing work. In particular, the team is working on developing the first annual report on charter school academic, organizational, and financial performance, which will cover the current school year.

We are really excited about this work and see it as a crucial component of addressing some of the historic accountability and access issues in Philadelphia's charter sector, as well as some of the long-standing and valid concerns about the quality and consistency of our authorizing work.

We think our track record overseeing Renaissance Charter Schools, pursuing the Authorizer Quality Initiative, and in pushing other turnaround approaches supports retaining turnaround oversight locally in Philadelphia, rather than devolving it to a new, unproven, state-created entity.

The biggest challenge faced by our Charter Schools Office is not a lack of will, but a lack of resources – a challenge that is experienced across the District.

¹ Note: A single charter operator challenged the new policies and they are currently under court review.

c. Appropriate, accountable funding

Which brings me to the final theme: appropriate, accountable funding. As I mentioned at the start of my testimony, in exchange for additional resources, we should be held accountable for delivering results.

It is also the case that the lack of resources in Philadelphia has constrained our ability to do additional turnaround work. The current funding structure is a zero-sum game – in a period of scarcity, every additional dollar allocated to turnaround is a dollar pulled out of others schools.

This at a time when 19 of our high schools do not offer a single Advanced Placement class, there are insufficient credit recovery opportunities for students who fall behind, enrichment and extracurricular activities have been slashed, many schools do not have full-time student health services, and on and on. Already, we have seen the steady accumulation of budget cuts negatively impact some of our highest-performing schools.

I should also note here that the turnaround efforts in Lawrence, Massachusetts and in Tennessee – which I understand to be models for this legislation – were supported by additional resources.

In Lawrence, which has a \$195 million budget, at least \$5 million per year in additional resources supported the first several years of the district's turnaround effort. For Philadelphia, with its \$2.6 billion budget, a comparable amount would be close to \$70 million annually.

Similarly in Tennessee, federal School Improvement Grant resources have supported both the state-level Achievement School District schools and the "iZone" schools in Memphis, which are run by the Shelby County District and have shown dramatic improvements, outpacing even the ASD-run charter schools.

Notably, Lawrence, the ASD, and Shelby County are wrestling with how to sustain and expand their turnaround work in the face of expiring grant resources.

As drafted, the proposed funding structure in Senate Bill 6 would create an unfunded turnaround mandate, resulting in the stripping out of supports and programs from schools left under local district control.

The legislation proposes having the transferee school district make per pupil payments to the Achievement School District under the charter school per pupil funding formula. For Philadelphia, the current blended charter per pupil payment is approximately \$10,000 annually.

To put it in simple terms, each time a student leaves the District to enroll in a charter school – and each time a school would be transferred to the proposed

Achievement School District – there is a net cost to the District. This net cost is less under our current Renaissance Charter School model than when a freestanding charter school opens. This is because when an entire school is converted to a charter school, as happens with the Renaissance Charter School model, the District is able to reduce a significant portion, but not all, of the costs for operating that school – primarily through staffing reductions.

Strikingly, Senate Bill 6 seems to undermine, or at least distort, our main mechanism for reducing costs. The legislation provides that if a school is taken over by the Achievement School District and the ASD or the chosen operator of that school does not elect to retain any employee previously assigned to the school, “the employee **shall be retained** as an employee of the transferring school district.”

In our current fiscal situation, we are not able to retain a reserve pool of teachers. As a result, to meet this mandate we would need to place those staff from the taken-over school in some other school and lay-off a proportional number of staff, causing further disruption in schools.

This provision compounds the burden already placed on the transferee school district by the per pupil payment structure.

At the end of my testimony are two charts. The first shows the main categories of spending by the District, including spending on charter schools, which has increased from 18% to 29% of the District’s budget over the past five years. The District gets no additional revenue for this. The second chart shows charter sector enrollment and spending growth in Philadelphia over the past five years and projected for next year.

As charter enrollment grows, the available per-pupil spending for students remaining in District schools declines. A significant increase in charter enrollment – as Senate Bill 6 could force – would result in devastating cuts to District schools, which already are operating with insufficient resources. To mandate turnaround without providing the resources to support it, will be to the detriment of tens of thousands of students.

Accordingly, I would urge the Committee and your colleagues to consider this legislation in tandem with providing dedicated funding that must be used for specified turnaround activities, including many of the approaches outlined in the bill. This additional funding can and should be tied to satisfying accountability measures.

In closing, we know there are no shortcuts in the incredibly challenging work of improving learning and delivering it more equitably across a city as big, diverse, poor, and complicated as Philadelphia. No single reform gets you there – not charter schools, not better standards, not blaming so-called “bad” teachers.

You need a system of schools – and we are creating one – that calls out and effectively responds to the needs of the most underserved students. There are aspects of Senate Bill 6 that could support that effort and, with our suggested modifications, we think the bill could significantly improve the opportunities available to students and families.

Thank you for you the opportunity to provide testimony today. I would be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.