

**THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA
SCHOOL REFORM COMMISSION**

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May 12, 2015

The Honorable Lloyd Smucker
351 Main Capitol
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3013

Dear Senator Smucker and Members of the Education Committee:

As a member of the School Reform Commission in Philadelphia, I support Senator Smucker's legislation, which would bring focus, urgency, flexibility and accountability to the challenge of addressing the Commonwealth's most struggling schools. My hope is that the General Assembly will approve this legislation along with increased education funding. Only with both additional resources and transformative changes to the most chronically underperforming schools will we be able to meaningfully improve academic outcomes.

There are approximately 85 schools located in Philadelphia that fall into the bottom 5 percent on the Pennsylvania School Performance Profile which could be covered by the proposed legislation. This generally aligns with the School District of Philadelphia's own School Progress Reports, which list 95 schools in Philadelphia's "Intervene" category. In Philadelphia, the majority of these schools have been at or near the bottom of every assessment of a school's progress used in the last decade, even during periods in which funding has increased.

Although the School Reform Commission was created and given certain powers to address system-wide challenges, many of its efforts to catalyze school-level academic improvement have been stymied. While I urge caution not to exacerbate the already-severe funding shortage facing our city's public schools and ask you to explore alternative funding mechanisms, I applaud the powers given to districts so they can create change themselves in schools that the Achievement School District *may* intervene in under the proposed legislation.

In Philadelphia, we have many hard-working and dedicated principals and teachers. Still, the reality is that even when we find great school leaders to turn around long-struggling, high-poverty schools, work and other rules hamper potential transformation. This legislation mirrors the advantages available to the School Reform Commission for the benefit of the Achievement School District and any district with a school in the bottom 5% of schools.

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I favor the provisions in the proposed Achievement School District bill giving districts greater ability to hire outside managers and staff, to hire skilled school turnaround leaders who may lack traditional certifications, and to close or reconstitute schools.

I would however recommend an amendment to truly make it possible to transform the bottom five percent of schools commonwealth wide without waiting for an Achievement School District intervention. School districts across the Commonwealth can't effectively compete with charter schools if they are burdened with contracts that don't allow them to require longer school days and longer school years or other evidence based changes required to transform poorly performing schools. Charter schools, with a fresh start, can immediately implement evidence based strategies as they are not burdened with legacy obligations. That is, the tools available to the School Reform Commission are too limited and will ultimately just lead to mass charter conversions as was the result in Louisiana. There is nothing wrong with that outcome if a local district can't compete. I respectfully suggest that the legislation more explicitly level the playing field to allow districts to utilize evidence-based strategies to transform Intervene schools. Otherwise, they are fighting with one hand tied behind their back.

I also support the legislation because it eliminated a significant part of the elongated appeals process now available to the state's lowest performing charter schools. In Philadelphia, 12 of the 95 schools listed that would qualify as Intervene under the legislation are charter schools. Charter schools have become an important asset in the Commonwealth's efforts to close the achievement gap, but the challenges created by the expansion of charter schools—essentially the costs of running parallel systems of public education—must be offset by high standards for student achievement. Charter schools that do not deliver better outcomes for students than traditional public schools should not be able to keep their doors open while an unnecessarily slow appeals process drags on. In other states, low-performing charters can appeal revocation or non-renewal decisions through the courts, but they aren't allowed to continue enrolling students while an appeal is pending.

I proposed a Recovery School District which is analogous to an Achievement School District while serving in Philadelphia's City Council in a policy paper on education I released in 2010 based on my lack of belief that the leaders of the School District *at that time* were capable of significant turnaround. I have great faith in Dr. Hite and his team, and he will address his specific comments in person before the Committee. However, the additional tools the Achievement School District will give Dr. Hite and the District will, with an amendment leveling the playing field and additional resources, provide Dr. Hite with the ability to rapidly expand his turnaround effort.

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Similar legislation has been passed in a number of other states. In several, the results have been excellent. I note that in Memphis the local District's intervene schools outperform those taken over by the state. I would expect similar outcomes in Philadelphia. However, we can't guarantee the District will always have a great Superintendent like Bill Hite (although we work hard at it). In such an unfortunate circumstance, the Achievement School District will prove necessary for Philadelphia's families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Bill Green", written in black ink.

William J. Green
Commissioner

Cc: The Honorable Joe Scarnati
The Honorable Mike Turzai
The Honorable Stan Saylor
William R. Hite, Jr., Ed.D.