

**Senate Education Committee
Public Hearing on Charter School Funding
October 22, 2019**

Written Testimony of
David Hardy, Executive Director of Excellent Schools PA and Co-Founder of Boys' Latin
of Philadelphia Charter School

Good Morning Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman, and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is David Hardy and I am the Executive Director of Excellent Schools PA. I was at the door of the first charter school to open in Philadelphia in 1997. I am a co-founder of Boys' Latin of Philadelphia, an all-boys public charter school serving students in grades 6-12. I also serve on the board of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, which is the only statewide organization representing both brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools. And I am proud to be the chair the board of Ad Prima Charter School as well as the parent of a bricks and mortar and a cyber charter graduate. So I have lots of skin in this game.

Pennsylvania's public charter schools are currently educating more than 140,000 students, with the most concentrated populations being served in my hometown, Philadelphia. One-third of Philadelphia's public school students (75,000) are being served by charter schools and the demand for these schools grows every year, with 30,000+ students unserved and stuck on charter school waitlists this school year.

Several months ago, Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) released a report, in consultation with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, on the performance of charter schools in the Commonwealth. While the report presents opportunities for improvement, the CREDO report clearly showed that Pennsylvania's charter school are educating: a higher percentage of students in poverty compared to traditional public schools (66 percent compared to 43 percent); a higher percentage of special education students than district schools (16 percent compared to 15 percent); and a significantly higher percentage of black students compared to traditional public schools (43 percent compared to 12 percent). The CREDO report reinforces what those of us working with students in urban communities already know - - Pennsylvania's brick-and-mortar charter schools are producing better results for urban, low-income, or students compared to their peers in school districts.

Despite the data and research, and countless testimonials from families singing their praises (like the ones here today), Pennsylvania's public charter schools have endured constant attacks from the school districts that authorize them and politicians who choose to value the demands of special interest groups ahead of the needs of students. These attacks have centered around three inaccurate claims from charter opponents: 1) Charter schools are not serving their students well and providing a quality education; 2) Charter schools are not held to the same accountable standards as school districts; and 3) Charter schools are bankrupting school districts and are the cause of increase in local property taxes.

The first inaccuracy, that charter schools are not serving their students or producing student achievement results has been unfounded, time and time again. In addition to reviewing studies like the CREDO report that I mentioned previously, I urge members of the committee to visit their local charter schools to see the amazing academic and extracurricular offerings, and talk to the students who are flourishing in these environments. The difference is visible and striking. I also ask that the members of the Senate Education Committee (and every lawmaker) take the time to talk to the families who have chosen a charter school education. They will tell you how charter schools have impacted and, in some cases, saved their child's life.

To address the second claim, that Pennsylvania's public charter schools are not held to the same accountability standards as school districts, you may be shocked to hear that I actually agree with the anti-charter advocates who are pushing this rhetoric. That's because charter schools in our Commonwealth are held to a higher standard of accountability than school districts because parents CHOOSE these schools. When people have choices and competition exists in education, it has been shown that all schools improve because parents and students are holding schools accountable. In addition to parental satisfaction, which is sky-high, Pennsylvania's public charter schools must adhere to the same accountability and transparency standards as school districts. On top of what is required by school districts, charters also have to go through a rigorous renewal process every five years where additional reports and auditing are provided to charter authorizers.

Finally, the claim that charter schools are the cause of financial woes experienced by school districts is both inaccurate and an attempt to mislead the taxpayers of Pennsylvania. We hear it time and time again at school board meetings and in the media when school district leaders try to explain unbalanced budgets or deficits – "The rising cost of charter schools is putting a financial strain on our school district budget." The question we should be asking these school district leaders is... "Why?" Charter school tuition is set by the Pennsylvania Department of Education each year based on a formula in the Charter School Law, which looks at the per pupil expenditures of a charter student's home district. Unlike private schools, public charter schools in Pennsylvania can't arbitrarily increase their tuition rates. In addition, state law allows school districts to withhold approximately 15 percent (sometimes this is upwards of 25 percent) of a student's charter tuition payment to offset any financial hardships the district may experience when a student leaves for a charter. This is on top of the local property taxes they continue to collect from charter school families living in the district boundaries. So why do districts claim that costs are rising? Because more of their students are leaving for charters but school districts don't want to address the reasons why students are leaving.

In order to truly address the nuances of Pennsylvania's charter funding structure and put an end to the false rhetoric around charter schools, we need a fair and balanced commission, convened by the General Assembly, to study this issue. Until the issues facing school districts and public charter schools are addressed there will continue to be

a culture of bullying and intimidation perpetrated by traditional public education advocates who believe charters are stealing students and resources from them.

As I see it, you have two choices. You can do what may be politically expedient. Or you can do what is right for the children, and ultimately the future of the Commonwealth.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Profile

Number of students enrolled: 832

Number of school districts served: 3

Number of students in regular/special education: 670/162 (19.4%)

Cost per student in regular/special education:

FY2019 Actual Cost per Student : \$13,393

FY2019 Actual Cost per SpEd Student: \$27,566

Attendance policy for students:

All absences for all reasons, inclusive of full-day and individual class absences, are recorded and charged toward a student's attendance record. Absences occasioned by religious observances or school sponsored activities are recorded but are not charged toward a student's attendance record. For an absence to be excused a written note or e mail signed by a parent or guardian and specifying a legitimate reason must be presented to the office. For medical appointments documentation from the doctor or dentist office will be acceptable for a medically excused absence. Unexcused absences (truancy) are recorded and charged toward a student's attendance record. At any step in the attendance procedure the student and/or parent may appeal any charged absence. If a student has lower than 80% attendance (both excused and unexcused absences) for a course, they will not be able to earn credit for the course regardless of their grade. The Principal/Assistant Principal will consider requests for appeals when absences are occasioned by cases of extended illness or extenuating family circumstances. The presence of unexcused class absences (truancy) in an attendance record under appeal/review will adversely affect the school's decision to grant leniency in such cases. Teachers are not obligated to accept student work that was due during an unexcused absence or give a student the opportunity to make up a missed assignment or assessment from an unexcused absence. If a student's family does not turn in a parent note, send e mail communication or bring medical documentation for an absence, it will remain unexcused until proper paperwork is turned in.

How the school is organized and does it use a EMS provider: School has two divisions, high and middle schools. It is operated as one organization with onsite management and no EMS providers.

Number of faculty, as percentage, participating in PSERS: 27%