



**Testimony of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units
Dr. Andria Saia, Executive Director of Capital Area Intermediate Unit
Senate Education Committee
October 22, 2019**

Good Morning Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Dr. Andria Saia. I am the Executive Director of the Capital Area Intermediate Unit (CAIU), and I am here this morning in my capacity as co-chair of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU) Government Relations Committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important issue of charter and cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania.

Capital Area IU is one of the twenty-nine regional education service agencies in Pennsylvania. Created in 1971 by the General Assembly, IUs provide instructional, operational and technology services to the public and nonpublic schools in their regions throughout the Commonwealth. CAIU serves Cumberland, Dauphin, Perry, and northern York counties in south central PA. We focus our efforts on our twenty-four member school districts, 2 area vocational technical schools, over 50 non-public schools, and several charter schools and cyber charter schools.

IUs deliver services to charter and cyber charter schools in much the same way we do our member school districts. Those services include direct special education instruction for students, professional development for teachers and school leaders, school improvement for charter schools designated by PDE for improvement under ESSA, administrative and back office supports, meeting space for state assessment administration, technology network infrastructure, and more.

Given IUs' ongoing working relationship with charter and cyber charter schools, IUs have come to know charter schools well – both the positive contributions they offer students and families, and the challenges they face in delivering affordable high quality education.

Our state Association, PAIU, is quite selective in taking positions on legislation that affects charter and cyber charter schools. Our limited positions on charter and cyber charter schools include support for applying the special education funding formula to charter school tuition calculations, and support for SB 34, Senator Schwank's legislation addressing cyber charter

school tuition. Both of those positions speak to better aligning school district expenses for charter and cyber charter school tuition payments with actual charter and cyber charter school costs.

As the Committee considers legislation addressing cyber charter schools in particular, I believe it is important for Senators to understand well the breadth and depth of work IUs have done with school districts to create high quality cyber education opportunities for students, meaning cyber education programs that are not cyber charter schools.

Across the Commonwealth today, more than twenty IUs offer cyber education programs that allow students to take some or all of their courses online. Nearly 24,000 students are taking at least one online course through an IU operated cyber education program. Nearly 9,000 of those students are taking all their coursework online. These IU operated cyber education programs offer nearly 10,000 unique courses from which to choose.

While IU operated cyber education programs have unique features, they all differ from cyber charter schools in several important ways:

Students continue to be part of their school district and connected to their communities

In IU cyber education programs, students remain enrolled in their school districts. As a result, students have access to district guidance counselors and other school services, they can participate in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, and they receive their diplomas from their home district.

IU cyber education programs leverage existing resources to support students

IU cyber education programs utilize existing IU and district resources to provide an online learning experience that provides maximum support for students. Working together with districts, IU cyber education programs combine HR, technology and business services to operate the programs; utilize existing IU special education and curriculum professional staff; and regularly convene district leaders in order to stay abreast of the districts' and students' needs, concerns and challenges.

IU cyber education programs offer an affordable solution for school districts

IU cyber education programs offer an affordable solution for school districts eager to provide an online learning option for students and their families. Due to the participation of multiple districts, IUs can negotiate preferred pricing from online providers of course content, and computer and software companies. By being in partnership with districts, IU cyber education programs keep tuition rates affordable for districts and their taxpayers.

We recognize that IU cyber education program costs and cyber charter school costs are not an exact “apples-to-apples” comparison. However, when IU cyber education costs are as much as 75% less than cyber charter school tuition, we believe that is a clear indication that cyber charter tuition rates have no meaningful relationship to the actual costs of cyber charter schools.

To illustrate this point, I would like to offer data from CAIU’s cyber education program called CAOLA - Capital Area Online Learning Association. We recently examined actual district payments to cyber charter schools to calculate the potential savings in taxpayer dollars that CAOLA offers.

During the 2017-18 school year, CAIU school districts (Cumberland, Dauphin, Perry and northern York Counties) funded 3,268 students to attend cyber charter schools. 2,585 were general education students and 683 were special education students.

What we learned is that the average general education tuition to cyber charter schools was \$8,878/student, and the average special education tuition to cyber charter schools was \$17,522/student.

In contrast, those same students enrolled in CAOLA full-time (at least 6 courses) was \$4,370 for both general education and special education students. While there were some additional costs for services provided students at their home districts, the potential taxpayer savings of \$20 million per year just in CAIU districts alone is ample evidence that it is time for the General Assembly to make changes to the cyber charter tuition calculation mandated in the School Code.

IU cyber education programs are designed to meet local school district needs and preferences. Generally, IU programs follow one of three models:

- The district and the IU worked together to create online course content and use school district and/or IU faculty to teach;
- The IU uses its purchasing power to leverage discounted pricing for online course content and instruction from third party online learning companies, so long as the content is aligned to PA academic standards and the instructors are certified and Highly Qualified; and
- A program that combines elements of the two models.

It is also important to note that many school districts operate their own cyber education programs, using the same variety of models. In a number of cases, districts started by participating in an IU operated program, and then used that experience and assistance from the IU to create its own district program.

10 years ago, the CAIU partnered with other school districts and intermediate units to create the Capital Area Online Learning Association. Prior to CAOLA, 65% of our participating districts did not have comprehensive online options for students and families.

Our objective in establishing CAOLA was to create the flexibility and choice that students, parents and districts wanted for their learning options. We know from annual surveys we do with our students, families and districts that flexibility is the number one reason for choosing an online option.

Utilizing three different high quality content providers, CAOLA offers all users 2,246 unique courses from which to choose. Last year, 7,645 students enrolled in over 37,500 total courses, with 84% of students completing and passing the courses.

The benefits of choice in a 100% flexible format is that students can take one, two or all courses virtually. Students remained connected to their school, they are continuously monitored for attendance, completion and grades, and if they are not successful, the schools meet with the student and family to bring them back to the district brick and mortar option. Students remain eligible for sports, extracurriculars, clubs, social events like prom and homecoming, and of course, walking in graduation.

What are the results? Because CAIU school districts now offer an online learning option for students, 73% of districts report improved graduation rates, and 75% of districts report reduced dropout rates.

The demand for cyber education - at CAOLA and at IU programs across the state - continues to grow. On behalf of PAIU and the twenty-nine IUs in Pennsylvania, we stand ready to work with this committee and all members of the General Assembly to ensure that students and families have high quality, cost effective online learning options.