

Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee
Public Hearing on Charter Schools
Harrisburg, PA
October 22, 2019
Written Testimony of
Dr. James Hanak
CEO of Pennsylvania Leadership (cyber) Charter School
President of the Public Cyber Charter School Association

Good morning, Chairman Langgerholc, Chairman Dinniman, honorable members of the Senate Education Committee and fellow panelists.

My name is Dr. James Hanak. I am the founder and CEO of Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School, and the President of the Public Cyber Charter School Association. Our school started in 2004 with 340 students and has grown to over 3,100 today.

I have been asked to share with you from a parent's or a student's perspective why Cyber Charter Schools are an important piece of the public school education experience in Pennsylvania.

Several years ago, one of our students told me that he was so glad that we started PA Leadership Charter School. He said that if he had to go to school in his Philadelphia neighborhood, he would have to walk past the block where his best friend was shot and killed. He said to me, "I know they are coming after me."

Four years ago, our Valedictorian shared that in 9th grade, he told his mother that he wanted to attend a Cyber Charter School. Her response: "what's that?" He told his mother that his present school was not challenging enough. When he looked at our course catalogue on our website and realized that we have over 300 courses, he was sold. Upon graduation, with a straight A average, he was offered a four-year tuition free scholarship to New York University.

Several years ago I read in the Philadelphia Inquirer – front page – banner headline – "South Philly High School – 30 Acts of Violence in one Day." I wanted to put on our website, "PA Leadership Charter School, 10 years of existence – acts of violence – zero." I chose not to put that on our website because I thought it would be too controversial but I share this with you now to help you understand why students are choosing Cyber Charter Schools.

All of our parents and students tell us that they chose our Cyber Charter School because their current school does not meet their needs.

Because of our unique virtual learning system, we may have actually saved the life of one of our students. One of our young students was home alone studying in her room when two criminals broke into her home. She hid in the closet and texted her teacher who called 911. Within minutes the police arrived to apprehend the two intruders.

One of the criticisms of Cyber Charter Schools is that we remove socialization from the student. This is true. We remove the socialization of bullying, drugs, sex, teasing, ostracizing, religious discrimination, and intimidation for not being able to keep up. What we offer to parents is the opportunity to choose

their child's influencers. We give back to the student over four hours of normally wasted time- for example: bussing, changing of classes, discipline issues, taking roll, and lunch. When our students take the long walk from the kitchen table to their laptop, they are immediately interacting with their curriculum, their teachers, their peers and their computer. From an early age we are preparing our students to compete in a highly technical society.

Attached are numerous comments from our parents that are taken from the following links:

Niche – 212 reviews, 4.5/5 star rating

<https://www.niche.com/k12/pennsylvania-leadership-charter-school-west-chester-pa/>

Great Schools- 118 reviews, 4/5 star rating

<https://www.greatschools.org/pennsylvania/west-chester/6400-Pennsylvania-Leadership-Cs/#Reviews>

Facebook – 99 reviews, 4.6/5 star rating

<https://www.facebook.com/PALCS/>

The value of a Cyber Charter School can be summed up by the comments from one of our parents:

"I really appreciate everything PALCS has done for not only my son but my family! The stress level has been cut low due to my sons understand and love for school again thanks to all of his wonderful teachers! With his succeeding means less arguing! He went from D's in public school to honor roll now!! Thanks PALCS!"

It has been suggested that local school districts could create their own Cyber School and do it cheaper than the costs for Cyber Charter Schools. There are numerous problems with this concept.

1. PA Leadership Charter School spends well over ½ million dollars yearly to keep our software delivery system state of the art. Our system now is fully integrated with the entire school so that students, parents, teachers, guidance counselors, technology team and student services have appropriate access to the student and his or her records.
2. PA Leadership has created a learning management system in a plug and play platform. Most recently, we have incorporated Canvas, Power School for tracking Special Ed Students, and dozens of other off the shelf programs into our platform making PA Leadership a state of the art fully integrated school.

The software PA Leadership has created can in part:

- Identify at risk students
 - Provide parent accounts with parent log in access to see all that their child is doing on individual assignments
 - Enable teachers to evaluate their curriculum based on feedback from students and parents
 - Fully align and track curriculum that is accessible throughout the school
3. Cyber Charter Schools have over 150 reports that they must provide to the State and Federal Departments of Education. These reports document the academic growth of our students and provide financial, health, bullying, and numerous other categories that enable the Cyber Charter

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School Authorizers to hold the Cyber School accountable. For PA leadership's charter renewal, the school provided over 20,000 pages of requested documentation. District Cyber Schools do not have these accountability requirements. Of the some 20 or so District Cyber Programs, only one – Philadelphia Virtual Academy (PVA) has student scores that are available to the public. The scores for PVA are significantly lower than the independent Public PA Cyber Charter Schools.

4. PA Cyber Charter Schools are effective because they spend all of their resources on developing their cyber program. If school districts are required to create their own cyber program, they will simply partner with a resource like PVA that was developed as a reaction – a line item within a larger budget – in response to the Cyber Charter School movement.
5. School Districts state that they can run a Cyber Program for much less than a Cyber Charter School. What they do not report is that they may or may not provide a computer / high speed Internet line. They also fail to report all the other costs that are required for a typical home school student such as guidance, administration, athletics and the like.

In closing, I was called by the head of technology from a large eastern Pennsylvania school district. He wanted to visit our school to see what we could do. I told him that I would be glad to provide him with information on how his school district could develop a similar cyber program. He told me, "No, no, no. My superintendent told me to check out the Cyber Charter Schools to find the best ones. We know that we cannot duplicate what you are doing. We just want to be able to send interested students to the best of all Pennsylvania Cyber Charter Schools."

Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman, honorable members of the Senate Education Committee and guests – may I encourage you to resist the criticisms that Cyber Charter Schools are not quality schools. I am attaching an article I wrote that was recently published demonstrating that Cyber Charter Schools are much better than their raw PSSA scores. May I also encourage you to resist the forces that call for cutting the funding for Cyber Charter Schools. Most Cyber Charter Schools survive month to month, spending virtually all of their income on their students. Those Cyber Charter Schools that have discovered economies of scale and have modest fund balances need those balances in order to survive political winds that delay or cut their funding.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify before the committee.

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- * Number of students enrolled. 3,100
 - * Number of school districts served. 240
 - * Number of students in regular education and special education. Regular 2,500. Special Ed 600
 - * Cost per student in regular education and cost per student in special education. \$10,500 Regular, \$22,000 Special Ed
 - * Attendance policy for students. Must log in and check assignments and remain current with school work
 - * Time spent in live class rooms vs. time spent watching recorded lessons. 15% live, 5% recorded
 - * How the school is organized and if they use an EMS provider. PALCS is organized similar to other public schools. PALCS does not use an EMS provider.
 - * Number of faculty, as a percentage, participating in PSERS. Approximately 50%

Appendix I

By: Dr. James Hanak, President of Public Cyber Charter School Association and CEO of PA Leadership (cyber) Charter School

CREDO Report on Cyber Charter Schools vs. other ways to evaluate Cyber Charter Schools

Those who oppose Pennsylvania Public Cyber Charter Schools have been quoting the recent Stanford University CREDO Report that states that Public Cyber Charter Schools in Pennsylvania are a dismal failure. Why is it then that 36,000 students have chosen to leave their traditional home district to attend one of these 15 schools and why is that number is growing daily?

The answer is that their home public school is failing them – so much so that these students are on average 1 ½ years behind when they enter a typical PA Cyber Charter School. Once the student is enrolled in a Cyber Charter School, the test scores for that student are attributed to the Cyber School no matter how much the previous school has failed that student.

The CREDO Report compares standardized testing scores only. These scores cannot assess at what point in time or why the student failed – whether in their previous home school setting or in the present Cyber Charter School. Therefore, other criteria should be used to evaluate the true value and successes of a PA Cyber Charter School. This same CREDO study reports that the first year a student is in a PA Charter School, their “learning gains” can be as low as a minus 70 days of learning (p.32). By the third year, however, these “learning gains” grow to a plus 15 days – an increase of 85 days of learning over three years! Only three years were analyzed. If these trends continued, however, Charter Schools would dramatically outpace traditional schools in learning gains.

When measured by multiple standards, Public Cyber Charter Schools do quite well according to Niche.com.

According to Niche’s website, their 2019 rankings are “based on rigorous analysis of academic and student life data from the U.S. Department of Education, along with test scores, college data, and ratings collected from millions of Niche users.” You can [view a full list of the factors](#) that they take into account when collecting their data on [niche.com](#).

In this analysis, Public Cyber Charter Schools in Pennsylvania, when evaluated only by the raw scores of their students standardized tests can score below “proficient” (70% out of 100%).

When schools are compared utilizing other criteria, however, Public Cyber Charter Schools score in the 74-79 percentile. Cybers are at the top of all Pennsylvania public schools in SAT scores and at the top of all Charter Schools overall when ranked in multiple areas or areas such as “College Readiness”.

Openpa.gov reports that Public Cyber Charter Schools rank in the top 38% of all public schools when rated on the percentage of income spent on direct instruction. The five top Public Cyber Charter Schools (1/3 of the total) rank in the top 20% of all public schools.

The bottom line is that Public Cyber Charter Schools are meeting unique and specialized needs of their students. Depending on how they are rated, Public Cyber Charter Schools can stand out as academically strong schools. Students and parents alike rave about their Public Cyber Charter Schools. There are 100’s of such testimonies on the Niche.com website. The real question is – do we really believe in public parental choice or do we believe in the old system that determines where a public school student goes to school based only on his or her zip code?

Appendix II

Parent reviews

PA Leadership Charter School

PALCS parents often write reviews on independent review boards such as Niche, Great Schools and Facebook. Below is a sampling of how PALCS families feel Cyber School affected their lives.

Niche – 212 reviews, 4.5/5 star rating

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Great Schools- 118 reviews, 4/5 star rating

<https://www.greatschools.org/pennsylvania/west-chester/6400-Pennsylvania-Leadership-Cs/#Reviews>

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Sample Reviews -

“PALCS has been a savior for our son. He is 13 and has autism, sensory processing disorder and other learning disabilities. It has been the best decision we ever made! From day one, the school was so supportive of him and understood his learning differences. He has the most incredible, supportive team of teachers and therapists. There are opportunities for socialization and he has grown leaps and bounds in the last 2 years. He's even been on the honor roll! He tells me he never wants to leave PALCS and I agree with him completely. PALCS has truly been the best thing that ever happened to us.” ~ **Parent**

“We have been with PALCS for 3 years and it has been a game changer for our family! We homeschooled before but with baby #5 it was getting difficult. PALCS is the perfect combination of homeschool and public school. My kids are getting a great education and still have the freedom of working at home. The teachers and staff go above and beyond to get to know your child and family. The care and attention is individual and I have seen my children grow exponentially since we started with PALCS. I cannot recommend them enough!” ~ **Parent**

“I switched over to Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School before Christmas during my sophomore year, it was the best decision that I have ever made. My previous high school was lacking educationally and in good teachers and I felt that I wasn't able to learn and do the best that I could so I switched. PALCS teachers are amazing and the classes that are offered have challenged me in many good ways. I feel more prepared for college and I think that they have prepared me for many things in life. They have a lot of clubs and field trip opportunities; I believe that these opportunities are way more abundant than at a normal public schools. The due dates are very flexible and fit into my personal schedule very well and I am sure that they will fit with yours too....” ~ **Student**

“PALCS has been a lifesaver for our family. Our son has type 1 diabetes and requires continuous blood sugar monitoring and insulin injections throughout the day. Having him be able to do school while at home enables us to have better management of his sugars. PALCS has given us the flexibility to be able

to go to the many doctor appointments we require without the need to miss school. The teachers are awesome and they make themselves available to the students. Our son's grades drastically improved from being in a traditional school setting. There are many field trips throughout the year that give the students the opportunity to meet other students and their teachers in person." ~ **Parent**

"Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School has given me many opportunities to take difficult classes to prepare me for medical school. The support of the teachers and counselors has been amazing as well! I highly recommend PALCS to anyone looking for a school to prepare them for college and needing support!" ~ **Student**

"We are in our 6th year at PALCS. My son just graduated and I have a junior in HS and a 7th grader, currently. We love the freedom this school provides. Its online structure teaches children real life time management skills, as they learn to prioritize their classwork and life balance. The plethora of educational opportunity and paths is also impressive. From programs for gifted children to "artsy" children (CPFA is top-notch) to vocational programs, the possibilities are endless. My praise doesn't even begin to address the issue of school safety. With my children safely at home, I have never had the fear of my children being bullied or in danger. "But what about the social aspect?" you ask. PALCS has weekly activities, trips, gatherings via technology or in person. My children have not missed a beat. Overall, I adore this school. The current parent liaison, Diane Linskey, and her team, make the transition to online school smooth as butter. I highly recommend it to any parent." ~ **Parent**

"PALCS is an excellent school providing many opportunities for those that wouldn't normally have them. Education is very important to us and our current district is very far behind where we would like our kids to be. PALCS provides a diverse curriculum and classes that our kids wouldn't normally be able to experience. We are grateful for the excellent teachers and staff and all the opportunities and choices." ~ **Parent**

"We are new to PALCS this year after being with another popular cyber charter for the past 6 years. Both of my children have enjoyed their experience and have had awesome teachers that have challenged them. I appreciate that the curriculum is tailored to each student. No need to be bored here. We also enjoy the various outings sponsored by the school. We have had a few tech issues, but nothing that a little perseverance didn't take care of. I would highly recommend this cyber charter school over other popular choices in Pennsylvania." ~ **Parent**

"We chose PALCS because our son was not challenged academically in his former school. PALCS academics, teachers and individualized programs have been amazing. USP program is one of the best ones for middle school kids in Pennsylvania. We recommend PALCS to everyone who is looking for a different school." ~ **Parent**

"My daughter started this school her mid-year of kindergarten. At first I was nervous and uncertain about how well she was going to adjust from a traditional school to a cyber base school. She ended kindergarten already beginning her 1st grade year. I have been in love ever since. Now she is in the 3rd grade. She loves school and the freedom that it gives her to be able to do other things that she likes to do. But don't get me misunderstood this school is very challenging but the pressure creates the diamonds of the world. Thank you." ~ **Parent**

Appendix III

Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School

Comments from 2018-2019 Parent Survey – each paragraph is a separate comment:

PALCS provides us the freedom of teaching our children at home in our setting while providing the educational tools to advance through the outdated compulsory school model.

Because of PALCS, my daughter once again loves school and loves learning. Her previous public school became a very overcrowded and stressful environment over the last year and had taken that love away from her. It was truly devastating to her and to our family.

The flexibility really helps our family with our child care schedule. We also love that our daughter can attend from anywhere with internet access because it allows us to travel often, which has been extremely beneficial to our daughter as she has been able to experience much more than she would in a typical school environment.

The teacher interaction is great. I also appreciate that any time we have needed a question answered someone is always ready to help

I love how I am in constant communication and always up to date on my son's school day. I also like that you offer tutoring. My son struggles in math...

Really appreciate the ease of looking at my children's assignments, current grades, lessons, etc. I also appreciate the clear grading rubrics.

Provides us with wonderful teachers & staff, provides extra activities outside of the regular curriculum, organizes all required mandatory testing, welcomes feedback, provides us with all necessary equipment and materials needed throughout the school year, covers internet expense, always looking for ways to improve, offers good choices in electives, tailor to individual needs.

We love the flexibility and awesome teacher communication.

We like the flexibility PALCS provides for our son who has ADHD and severe anxiety. When he is feeling overwhelmed he is able to take a break and come back later. In a traditional school setting this is not possible. PALCS has greatly reduced his anxiety and his grades have been outstanding because of this.

Provides a classroom environment with flexibility. Teachers provide feedback and are available as needed. Better use of technology for classroom assignments. Extracurricular activities are fun and engaging.

PALCS has been able to connect with my child who wasn't understanding in a brick and mortar school.

We appreciate each and every member (teachers/staffs) at PALCS. The communication line at PALCS is excellent and proactive. We have always immediately being notified with emails or phones whenever there is issue(s) that impact students. The teacher(s) are very patient with the students. They always smile and provide the best of their knowledge. The teachers make sure to approach students at each

own level. Each of the teachers has their own unique style of teaching. Regardless whether the teachers are tired or not feeling well on that particular day, they always perform their best. My son enjoys learning from his teachers at PALCS and we couldn't be happier. PALCS makes things possible for my son where there is no other place can.

It is great to be able to do school from home. We love being able to work at our own pace. If we have an event coming we can work ahead. If my daughter is ill we have time to submit work later. It's great! It's wonderful that she gets to have virtual lessons and has great help classes from her teacher.

PALCS gives us a far greater selection of courses than would be available in our brick and mortar. Our son is advanced in most things and the ability to challenge him at PALCS is key.

My daughter was bored at our local high school and felt a lot of time was wasted moving from class to class, assemblies, etc. Here she does her work and has time to do things that she enjoys.

I love how I can view each assignment and the teacher's comments. I feel as though I know EXACTLY what my daughter is learning, which lends itself to confidence in the school overall.

My son learns at a slower pace and needs to have his total focus on what he is learning. Being at home with no distractions and being able to stop the virtual lessons and go back to pick up things he missed has been great.

PALCS curriculum challenges my boy, in his previous school he was bored with the work because it was too easy for him. His teacher is awesome and very helping with assuring that we understand the learning and teaching process of Cyber School. Glad I made the switch.

It has served us so well. We can't have our daughter in an environment such as schools, especially this time of the year. Every winter season we've had some sort of issue and sickness. Until last year when we figured out what was wrong, and keeping her home was our only option. The past year has been amazing, it had the ups and downs, but mostly ups. So being able to stay at home, and keep her school going, has made a huge difference in our lives.

Flexible schedule, allows for a comfortable environment for my child to work, good feedback and response time.

I like that the curriculum challenges my son. I like how teachers not only have different days set up for online classes, they also have times set up for actual helping my son when he gets stuck on a subject.

Great feedback from most teachers. Impressive alternative to public school. Most teachers seem to genuinely care about my daughter and take time to assist her. Allows my daughter an opportunity to pursue her love of performing in a more flexible academic environment.

Excellent Teachers. My kids are focused more on learning and actually enjoy learning more. The virtual classes are a terrific way of interacting with the teachers and other students. My kids are now independent learners and critical thinkers. They are able to learn at their pace because not every child is the same. PALCS allows the kids more flexibility as their assignments are always posted in advance. We as parents can interact with the teachers and staff anytime we need to. I also love the fact that I can also

take part in my child's learning by seeing in real time what they are being taught. I love the fact that the teachers choose to design their own courses that fit their style.

Allows my child to work at his pace and not have to wait on the rest of the class, allows for more flexibility and he can participate in other learning experiences that aren't tied to a classroom.

The teachers are always available and always get right back to us with answers to questions. The teachers always make it very clear what is going on each day!

This format show cases her abilities--so much so that she's gotten better grades than at brick and mortar school. She received a partial scholarship to go to Point Park U.

We can't express enough that PALCS has done extremely wonderful job, to guide us (my son in particular) for a successful path ahead. PALCS is the best place to be for your child.

I really appreciate everything PALCS has done for not only my son but my family! The stress level has been cut low due to my sons understand and love for school again thanks to all of his wonderful teachers! With his succeeding means less arguing! He went from D's in public school to honor roll now!! Thanks PALCS!

PALCS has provided my son the best education and made things possible for him, while we couldn't find anywhere else. Go PALCS !