

## **Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee**

Public Hearing on Charter School Entities

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Written Testimony of

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Good morning Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Jane Swan, I am the CEO of REACH Cyber Charter School, a cyber-charter school educating over 3496 learners in grades kindergarten to twelve.

As an educator with 20 years' experience, 11 years in administration of virtual learning, I have witnessed firsthand the positive impact cyber-charter schools have on students. Reach students reside across Pennsylvania and represent 420 districts. Students choose virtual learning for a variety of reasons. Some are pursuing opportunities in athletics or the arts that require a flexible schedule. Others may have experienced bullying within their district school or are temporarily restricted to home due to a medical condition. Approximately 18% of students are identified as needing special education services. The cyber-charter model meets these students where they are while providing a complete educational experience. Reach students attend live classes, receive one on one attention from teachers, and have the option to participate in many extracurricular clubs and field trips across the Commonwealth.

As a cyber-charter school, Reach strives to provide students with unique opportunities to participate in personalized learning. We offer three pacing options: students can enroll in a traditional school year program or a year round option, and high school students may complete an accelerated program. As a STEM focus school we also seek to integrate STEM learning across curricula and have created several projects to encourage students to experiment and explore in math and science. We currently have over 20 STEM camps including Embryology, where learners across the state watched the eggs hatch to chickens via live web streaming and Stream Studies held virtually with Trout growing in our fish tank, as well as,

outside opportunities for families to meet with teachers at streams across PA, testing water samples and more! We have 3D printing, coding club, a Weather STEM camp and more!

Another unique characteristic of Reach students is their mobility. Some students may choose or need to attend a cyber charter for only a short time. The cyber charter model allows them to remain in school under difficult circumstances. Some cyber school students may have struggled in the brick and mortar environment or have transferred between multiple schools due to frequent moves or instability. Participation in a state-wide virtual allows these students to experience stability and a consistent support from teachers, counselors, and peers. However, the mobility of these students presents challenges. Studies show mobility negatively impacts math and reading achievement and Reach students, while making progress, are still underperforming on state assessments. A performance framework that accounts for student mobility would better reflect the progress made by students in a virtual environment. 42% of Reach students are new, so far, this year.

Research conducted at Reach Cyber Charter School and other Connections Academy Schools shows that it is not unusual for students who are new to online school to demonstrate performance on state assessments below state averages and that with consecutive years of enrollment, the gap between the state and Connections Academy schools closes significantly. Between the 1st and 4th years of operation, Reach has increased from just over 400 students to nearly 3500 students. Each year, staff have worked with each student to assess their needs and provide a personalized learning program to maximize strengths and compensate for educational gaps.

On a typical day, a Reach student will participate in both synchronous and asynchronous learning. While students are expected to attend LiveLesson sessions with other students, teachers also engage students in small group tutoring and one-on-one interactions. If students are unable to attend LiveLessons, they may watch the recording later. Recordings also allow a student to revisit content after class and review concepts requiring more study. Students are also expected to complete activities on their own, including reading assignments, assessments and projects. These activities are monitored by the student's learning coach, typically a parent or guardian, who is responsible for the student's attendance and participation.

Learning coaches track and enter the number of hours a student is engaged in school work per day. The number of hours each student is expected to complete each week is based on their pacing option. This method allows students flexibility to complete work, but also holds them accountable to maintain a schedule and keep track with their peers. If a student needs to be absent for an entire day, his or her learning coach will contact the school with information on the absence and request an excused absence. If granted, an attendance coordinator enters the excused absence into the system. Reach students can work anytime day or night, course work and recordings are always available.

Attendance monitoring takes place on the Connexus platform, which is provided and maintained by an Education Management System, EMS, Pearson Online and Blended Learning. The Connexus platform is a Learning Management System, LMS, that includes the LiveLesson technology where students interact with teachers and other students in real time. LiveLesson allows students to ask and answer questions, and participate in group discussions through video, audio, and chat. Connexus facilitates communication between the school and families and allows teachers to access data related to each student's personalized learning program. Pearson OBL also provides some support services to the school in coordination with myself, my leadership team, and the Reach Board. As CEO, I implement the school's vision and mission, oversee school operations, and report to the Reach Cyber Charter School Board. The Board, comprised of community members from across the Commonwealth, is responsible for school governance.

Our school staff is comprised of highly qualified administrators who began in traditional public schools, veteran teachers, counselors, social workers from the public and private sector, as well as, brand new teachers out of college! They are a caring, collaborative and knowledgeable group of educators who put the child first. Our families come to and stay with Reach because of our teachers! While our teachers do not participate in PSERS, we offer competitive salaries and benefit packages and teachers may participate in an alternative retirement program.

Finally, I would like to invite each member of the Committee to visit Reach. The best way to understand how virtual learning works is to watch our teachers at work and witness the daily successes our students achieve. Thank you for the opportunity to tell you about our school and community.

