

Senate Education Committee Public Hearing: Charter Schools  
Testimony of Kari King, President and CEO  
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children  
October 22, 2019

Thank you, Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and members of the committee for allowing me to testify today. My name is Kari King and I am the President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). PPC is a statewide, independent, non-partisan advocacy organization focusing on the improvement of the health, education and well-being of children and youth in the Commonwealth and is working toward making Pennsylvania one of the top ten states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child. PPC receives no government funding and is not a trade or membership association, so in this respect we offer a unique vantage point on most K-12 education issues. PPC focuses on two primary things in this debate: the quality of education a child is receiving and how associated data informs our policy position.

PPC is the statewide grantee of the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT initiative. The foundation, started by UPS founder Jim Casey after he had personal touchpoints with the child welfare system in the early 1900s, focuses on putting indicators, or data, of child well-being at the forefront of decision making in public policy forums focused on children. This gives us access to data and related analysis that ensures we are providing an objective, nonpartisan approach, and that is my goal today in presenting to the committee.

Our position on charter schools has remain unchanged over the course of the past several legislative sessions and is rooted in what will most positively impact children. In that way, you may find our input relatively narrow in focus when considering such a sweeping issue. I feel this is appropriate for PPC, though, because my comments will be tailored exactly to that: what impacts the kids in classrooms. We want to be clear that while we are supportive of charter schools as options for families and the innovations they are intended to provide to students, we also expect that they are held to the same standards as traditional public schools in all areas and benchmarks. Their current outcomes, particularly that of cyber charters, are clearly not indicating the same set of expectations. We strongly support efforts to improve charter school governance, performance and accountability and have been making consistent these same consistent recommendations to policymakers over several years.

Our specific feedback can be bucketed into five core areas:

- 1) PPC recommends the establishment of a charter funding commission to make recommendations on funding reforms. Ideally the commission would revise the per-student basic and special education charter and cyber charter school funding formulas to more accurately reflect the costs assumed by charter school entities to deliver services and incorporate weighted elements that better consider

student characteristics. On a broader level, similar efforts, such as the Basic Education Funding Commission and the Special Education Funding Commission, which is currently being reconstituted, have proven to be an effective means of addressing complex funding issues and a commission focused on charter funding would give the time and process to allow for public and stakeholder input, commission review, and according full legislative body action.

2) Charter reform legislation must include language to have the Department of Education develop a standardized charter application form so that entities cannot handpick their students, thereby ensuring every child has the same access to a charter school should it be decided by the student and his or her family as the best option for them. This language has consistently been included in various charter bills and is a simple, commonsense approach.

3) There should be charter school and charter management company compliance with transparency measures already in place for public school districts. Examples include compliance with the Right to Know Act, State Ethics Act, and posting employee salaries on PDE's website.

4) We require charters to demonstrate a history of success prior to allowing them to be able to expand. This also calls for the creation of a clear recovery process that support charter schools who are not meeting academic performance benchmarks to ensure the future success of struggling schools.

5) Finally, performance standards that effectively evaluate school and personnel performance and hold charter schools accountable for educational outcomes should be developed. This framework must also include a mechanism and timelines that articulate which outcomes must be shared with parents and stakeholders. PPC has specifically advocated for charter legislation language requiring the Department of Education to develop a performance matrix in order to review outcomes in a standardized fashion. This language needs to read as a "shall" and not a "may." Again, this component has been included in recent versions of charter legislation.

PPC is optimistic that reformed policies will lead to the expansion of successful charter schools, recovery or closure of failing charters, and more generally, a sound education system with appropriate accountability and performance standards for students whose families choose the charter school option. Ensuring that these school systems function seamlessly, have sound policies, and are equitably funded is paramount to eliminating the current reality of the "haves and have nots" system that Pennsylvania public schools face today.

Thank you for your consideration and for the opportunity to testify today.