

Scott Gordon - Testimony to Senate Education Committee
Mastery Network of Charter Schools
October 22, 2019

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and to offer testimony. My name is Scott Gordon, and I am CEO of the Mastery Network of Charter Schools in Philadelphia. Mastery operates 15 charters in Philadelphia and we are unusual because 12 of those charters are turnarounds of schools that were formerly the lowest performing Philadelphia School District schools. Mastery is also the largest charter network in Philadelphia and the Commonwealth, serving over 11,500 students.

I am here to share our experience as a charter network dedicated to turning around our most struggling schools in some of the highest poverty communities in the City of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth. I want to strongly voice our support of greater transparency in charter school operations and to fully endorse HB355, which does just that. I also want to express our alarm and great concern about potential changes to the special education funding formula, which – if enacted – would cut our special education funding nearly in half and dramatically impair our ability to serve our most needy students.

Introduction

Let me introduce Mastery. We were founded in 2001 as a single high school. Beginning in 2005, the School District of Philadelphia, under then Superintendent Paul Vallas, requested that we turn around three struggling middle schools and expand them to include high school grades. Fourteen years later, the first of those turnarounds, Thomas High School, was recently rated K-8 Peer Leader in 2018 by the School Progress Report. Beginning in 2010, under Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative, Mastery was invited to turn around nine elementary and high schools that had been identified by the School District as their persistently lowest performing schools. Under the terms of the Renaissance program, Mastery enrolled all the existing students and maintained regional low-incidence special education programming for students with severe autism, cognitive impairments, multiple medical impairments and emotional disabilities. We also agreed to continue operating the schools as neighborhood schools. So, for all intents and purposes, our schools continued to operate in the same buildings, with the same children – the only thing that changed were the adults, now employed by a charter school. The challenge here was an exciting and daunting one – could we harness the flexibility and entrepreneurial energy of charter schools to turnaround neighborhood schools that have been struggling in some cases for well over 20 years.

I am happy to share, that while our work is not done, the neighborhood schools turned around by Mastery have made dramatic progress. First of all, nearly 1,000 families from the neighborhood returned back to their neighborhood school after Mastery took over operation. Second, violence plummeted. Even Simon Gratz High School, which had been identified as a “persistently dangerous” school is now a safe, thriving school community. Finally, academic performance has soared. As the attached graph shows (See Appendix A), of our 12 turnaround charters – all initially performing far below district median – eight are now at or above the

district median in math and six are at or above the district in reading. The graph also illustrates the gains that have been made since the turnarounds.

I think it important that the committee recognize that in Philadelphia, brick and mortar charters in general have academically outperformed the school district. Researchers at Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education outcomes, the CREDO study¹, reported that students in Pennsylvania’s brick and mortar charter schools in urban areas, the majority being in Philadelphia, gained the equivalent of 35 additional days of learning in reading compared to if those students had been educated in their School District schools.

Special Education Population

Because Mastery’s charters were formerly the lowest-performing neighborhood schools, it is not surprising that we serve both a higher percentage of students in poverty, 86%, and a higher percentage of students with disabilities – 23% of our students – than the Commonwealth average and even the School District of Philadelphia average.

Mastery Special Education	SDP Special Education	PA Special Education
23%	15%	17%

Mastery Economically Disadvantaged	SDP Economically Disadvantaged	PA Economically Disadvantaged
86%	69%	46%

A large portion of our students with disabilities have very high needs. Of the 2,680 special education students Mastery serves, 23% of these students require tier II and category III level of services – a significantly higher percentage than the state average. An example is our Anchor program, a program within our schools for students in need of significant emotional support. Staffing this program requires a teacher, two paraprofessionals, and a social worker for just 12 students. We have learned that this work is complex, needs expertise instruction and social supports.

Special Education Funding Formula Concerns

Mastery recognizes that there is a very significant cost variance in serving students with high cost low-incidence disabilities versus lower cost speech and language disabilities. Accordingly, we believe a tiered funding structure is a fairer way to fund special education. However, the proposal as described by the special education funding commission has a very serious flaw that would result in a nearly 50% cut in special education funding – even for a charter school like Mastery that serves a high portion of tier II and tier III students. The flaw is this: the proposed funding formula applies a state-wide average reimbursement for the various special education

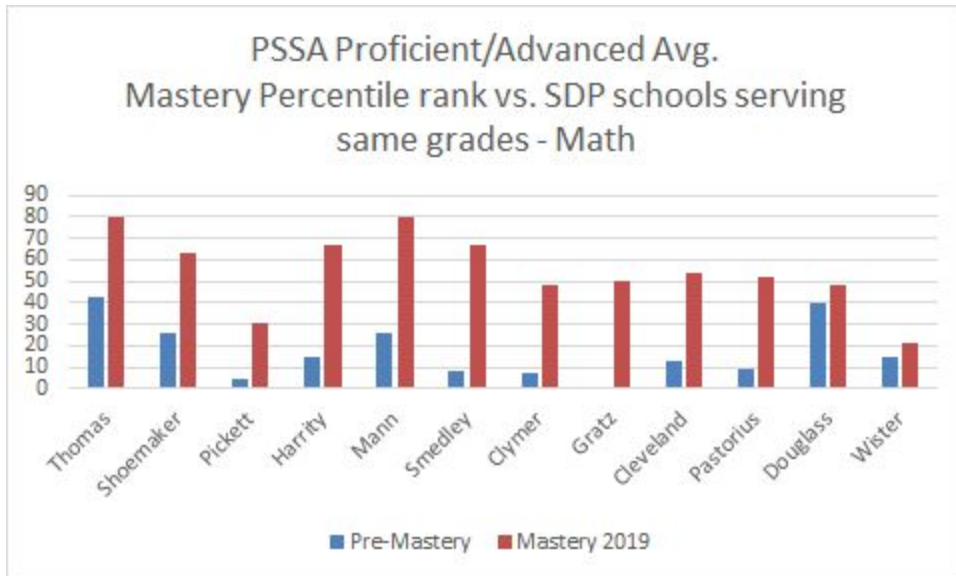
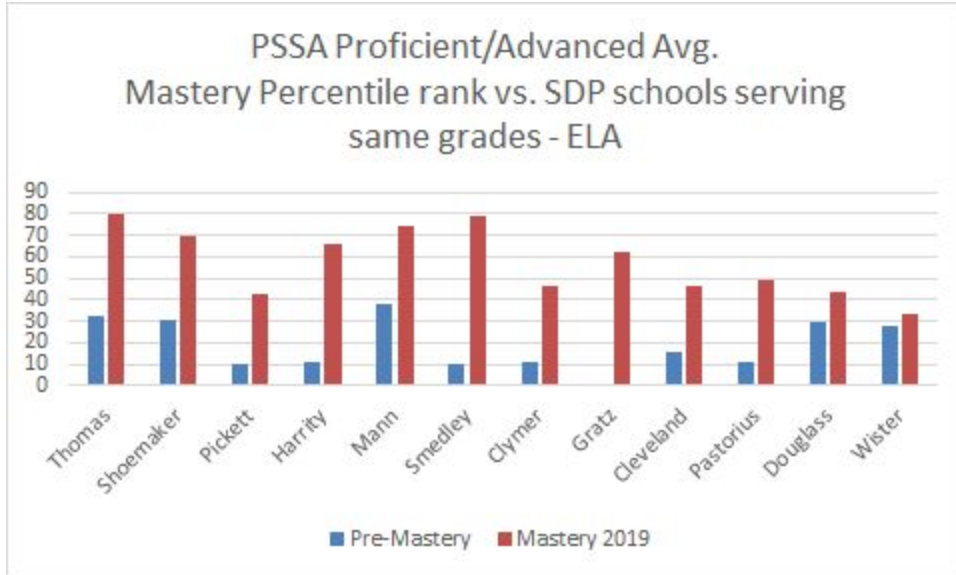
¹ https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/2019_pa_state_report_final_06052019.pdf

tiers. This state-wide reimbursement rate is half what the actual spending is in Philadelphia. The weighted state reimbursement is approximately 1.94 – which means in aggregate, an average special education student is reimbursed an additional 94% of cost to educate a regular education student. But, in Philadelphia, the actual cost for the average Philadelphia School District student is an additional 185% of the cost to educate a regular education student. For all intents and purposes, local taxpayers are making up the difference between the 90% state reimbursement and the actual cost. If this funding formula is implemented, a student with disabilities in the School District would receive twice the funding compared to a student with disabilities who lived next door but attended a charter school. Charter parents would be paying taxes, yet their children – because they attend a charter school – would not be able to receive the funding.

We believe there are many ways to address this flaw, while still maintaining a tiered reimbursement system. We also want to acknowledge that a shift to a tiered system would create funding winners and losers. So, we think it important that changes be implemented with a hold harmless and be applied to new funds, as the State has wisely done with other funding changes. Finally, the Mastery organization is eager to work with all parties to develop a fair and equitable funding formula.

Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this important conversation.

Appendix A



*Gratz did not have middle school PSSA scores prior to turnaround

*Douglass was originally turned around in 2010 and became a Mastery school in 2015

Appendix B

Requested information for written testimony

1. Number of students enrolled.

- As of October 18, 2019, we have 11,669 students enrolled in our Philadelphia charter schools..

2. Number of school districts served.

- We serve students in Philadelphia

3. Number of students in regular education and special education.

- As of October 18, 2019, we have 8,989 regular education students and 2,680 students in special education in PA.

4. Cost per student in regular education and cost per student in special education.

- Regular ed - \$12,000
- Special ed - \$30,000

5. Attendance policy for students

Students are expected to be in school and on time every day.

Consequences for Chronic Absences and Late Arrivals

Please Note: After ten (10) consecutive "illegal" absences, students will be dropped from Mastery's enrollment.

Occurrences Per Year	Absences (Illegal or Following Submission of Parent Note)	Late Arrivals
1	Automated phone call home (Repeat for each additional absence.)	
3	Truancy notification letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Parent contact via robocall ● Lateness letter
6	Attendance improvement conference, first District Attorney (DA) referral, and initial DA warning letter	Detention for each lateness
7		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group parent meeting ● One week of detention
10	Second DA referral and family conference with DA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Warning letter regarding possible consequence of grade reduction ● Community service
15	Regional court referral (citation with upcoming court date sent to the family)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Second warning letter regarding possible consequence of grade reduction ● Late arrivals will be noted in truancy documentation for students with 10+ absences.
20	Second regional court referral (citation with upcoming court date sent to the family)	
21-35	Truancy court follow-up actions	
35	The student may be required to repeat the grade level the next school year.	

5. How the school is organized and if they use an EMS provider.

Mastery operates 15 charter schools which contract with Mastery Charter High School for charter management services.

6. Number of faculty, as a percentage, participating in PSERS.

We have 262 employees enrolled in PSERS (**14%** of our total Mastery staff (1846) and **17%** of our total Mastery Charter Schools (PA) staff (1501)).