



A Voice for Cyber Charter Schooling in Pennsylvania

Statement of The Public Cyber Charter School Association (PCCSA)

For the

Pennsylvania Senate Education and Health and Human Services Committees

Submitted by

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Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, Chairwoman Brooks, Chairman Haywood, Members of the Senate Education and Health and Human Services Committees, thank you for the opportunity to provide this written statement regarding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on elementary and secondary schools in the commonwealth.

Pennsylvania has 14 public cyber charter schools that educate more than 60,000 public school students.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has created a multitude of very difficult challenges for schools and the families they serve, what has been made very clear are the critical differences between long-established, full-time virtual public schools and crisis-driven, emergency remote instruction. Specifically,

- Public cyber charter schools have been operating successfully for more than 20 years delivering a fully comprehensive and research-based education using proven virtual platforms
- Public cyber charter schools rely on curriculum specifically designed to meet key accessibility standards, and they provide computers, tablets and other resources so that students can readily access the technology they need
- Public cyber charter schools focus on engaging students remotely, with extensive protocols to ensure student participation

- Teachers receive consistent, specialized training to effectively teach and engage students in an online classroom environment
- Public cyber charter schools provide a necessary option for families who need an alternative to their traditional district schools for a wide range of reasons
- Most importantly, there has essentially been no gap in learning for public cyber school students since the beginning of the pandemic

While we all celebrate the incredible efforts of teachers in brick-and-mortar schools to help students navigate some very extraordinary circumstances, the pandemic has highlighted the very important role that public cyber charter schools play—whether we are in the midst of historic health uncertainty or we are enjoying “normal” times again. In either case, public cyber charter schools are an essential option for families who struggle to find the education their children need in a traditional school setting.

You do not have to take our word for it. On the whole, public cyber charter schools retained record percentages of students from the 2019-20 school year, and we enrolled record numbers of students in the current school year. The evidence is clear! Parents recognize the quality education that public cyber charter schools provide to families.

As a practical matter, the students who were enrolled in a public cyber charter school prior to March 2020 have seen little or no disruption in their education because of the pandemic. Further, the students who chose to enroll in one of these schools during the past 11 months quickly encountered certified teachers and staff specifically trained to provide outstanding virtual instruction. Public cyber charter schools have decades of experience ensuring that technology is maximized to allow students to excel in this online environment.

Part of the success of public cyber charter schools and their students is driven by a philosophy that recognizes that a virtual classroom is often a better fit for students—but there are also very tangible reasons as well. Public cyber charter schools give high quality computers to their students, and they work very hard to ensure that their students have access to high-speed internet.

In addition, public cyber teachers build their lessons from curriculum that not only reflects the commonwealth’s academic standards, but also is specifically tailored for a virtual learning situation. As a result, students in public cyber schools find themselves in the best setting to achieve their academic and social/emotional learning goals. In fact, when SAT/ACT scores and internal growth assessments are analyzed, Pennsylvania cyber charter schools do quite well. For example, on SAT scores, one of the 14 public cyber charter schools is rated No. 1 of all 180 charter schools in the commonwealth and in the top 5% of all public high schools in the state.

One undeniable impact of COVID-19 is the financial devastation it has caused for Pennsylvania’s economy. Of course, that devastation has created ripple effects, including the state funding available for public schools in the commonwealth. Unfortunately, there is a serious misconception being voiced by some education sectors, and echoed by Governor Wolf, that public cyber charter schools are adding to the fiscal challenges of Pennsylvania school districts. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic shown that virtual classrooms created by online public cyber charter schools provide the best opportunity for many students to succeed, it also has strongly underscored the actual cost savings that public cyber charter schools generate for school districts each and every year. ***The bottom line is that school districts keep a significant portion—25% on average—of the funding allocated for the students who leave their schools to enter public cyber charters even though these students are no longer being educated by the district.*** Said another way, public cyber charter schools generally receive only 75% of what brick-and-mortar public schools receive to educate the very same students. A further fiscal benefit to school districts is the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s policy that allows school districts to significantly adjust the requisite form (PDE-363) that determines funding it will forward to a public cyber charter school for a student who enrolls in one of these schools. The deductions allowed on the funding form for school districts go well beyond what the charter school law intended.

There is an additional clear measure of the tremendous return on investment that comes from a robust system of public cyber charter schools. ***On average, the portion of funding that follows students who enroll in public cyber charter schools represents less than two percent of a school district’s overall budget.*** In many cases, even with this insignificant expenditure, school districts are still able to maintain very healthy surpluses. It is also important to note that the funding that follows a student to a public cyber charter school is a mix of state, federal, and local tax dollars. As a result, public cyber school enrollments do not drive the need to increase school property taxes.

Statewide, the funding that follows these students to public cyber options that are better suited to meet their academic and other needs represents only two percent of the commonwealth’s entire education budget. At the same time, Pennsylvania school districts can collectively point to nearly \$5 billion in unassigned fund balances (surpluses).

That means these schools provide life-saving educational opportunities for thousands of children who have difficult health circumstances or special needs, who were bullied in their old schools, who live in rural settings without access to the courses they desire, who want to escape struggling urban schools, or who simply have the necessary support system at home to learn virtually, for a fraction of the cost when looking at overall education funding in the commonwealth.

Further, student diversity, equity and inclusion have long been top priorities for public cyber charter schools. Several of these schools have percentages of students of color that are significantly higher than the state average. As a group, public cyber charter schools also have significantly higher rates of economically disadvantaged students and students with IEPs. Another reason that ensuring continued access to a strong and well-funded system of public cyber charter schools is so very important.

As we mentioned previously, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc when it comes to the commonwealth’s economy, and it continues to challenge the ability of state government to fund key programs, including public education.

We commend the General Assembly for its past and ongoing work to bolster education funding in the commonwealth, and we support many aspects of Governor Wolf’s 2021-2022 budget

proposal for elementary, secondary and post-secondary students. However, we are compelled to share with this committee that we are gravely concerned about efforts to drastically restrict funding to public cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania. More specifically, we strongly oppose efforts to create a flat reimbursement rate that fails to realistically account for the actual cost of running successful public cyber charter schools. Likewise, we think cutting public cyber school funding by 30% while also funding school districts in a manner that ignores shrinking enrollments (hold harmless funding) is a fundamentally flawed approach that will severely limit access to a group of public schools strongly supported by thousands of Pennsylvania families.

While each of the state's 500 school districts has fiscal and other circumstances that makes each of them unique, they have at least one thing in common. They cannot be all things for all students, but they ***can*** work in productive partnership with public cyber charter schools—a public school option that tens of thousands of families have determined to be the best educational fit for their children. And, they can do so without any negative impact to their district bottom line. We implore Governor Wolf and the General Assembly to not cut funding for public cyber charter schools and to fully embrace them as a critical resource in helping students excel during the pandemic and in getting the commonwealth back on track when the COVID-19 virus is behind us.

In closing, PCCSA schools remain committed to helping any school district or other school entity to build effective distance-learning programs for their students and their faculty. We believe by working together—rather than as adversaries—we can ensure that every child has equal, affordable access to the type of education that is best for their individual need.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written statement for Senate Education and Health and Human Services joint hearing.