



# URBAN ACADEMY

— OF GREATER PITTSBURGH CHARTER SCHOOL —

437 Turrett Street • Pittsburgh, PA 15206-2831 • (412) 361-1008 • (412) 361-1042 Fax  
"Providing superior education that will develop in our students' academic excellence, leadership skills and social values."

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## WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO PENNSYLVANIA SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION K. CHASE PATTERSON - CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee, good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am Chase Patterson, and I am the father of a kindergarten student who attends the Urban Academy of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School. I also have the honor of serving as the Chief Executive Officer of the Urban Academy. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning and to discuss my thoughts and experiences as a public charter school parent and leader.

I want to begin my testimony by qualifying my perspectives, motivations, and interests surrounding reforms to our public education system. I had the pleasure of growing up in Pittsburgh's Beechview neighborhood. My family has been there since my mother was a young child. I attended St. Catherine's for kindergarten, and then for the balance of my schooling before college, I matriculated through the Pittsburgh Public Schools. I attended Overbrook Elementary, West Liberty Classical Academy, and Schenley High School. All these schools allowed me to learn, lead, and to develop, and cultivate my talents. I am proud to be a Pittsburgh Public Schools graduate, and I am proud to carry on the tradition of Schenley's motto, "Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve."

I love my work, and I appreciate the opportunity to lead one of the Commonwealth's oldest charter schools. Every day I experience joy, sadness, trials, tribulations, transcendence, and victory. We were founded as the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School in 1997 and supported Black community leaders in Education, Business, Civil Rights, and Community Activism. Chief among them was the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's CEO Esther L. Bush and Dr. Helen Faison, a deputy superintendent for the Pittsburgh School District, who spoke directly to the board asking for the charter's approval. Since our founding, we have served mainly Black students to help advance the mission of ***providing a superior education that will develop in our students' academic excellence, leadership skills, and social values that will enable them ultimately to become positive contributors to the community in which they live, and society as a whole.*** Our mission and vision grew directly from the Urban League's mission to assist African Americans in achieving social and economic equality. Towards this end, we are collectively committed as a school community to excellence and superior quality in our services and activities.

Since I became involved with the Urban Academy nearly 13 years ago, the attack on charters has been brutal, constant and inappropriately misplaced. My service, as well as the service of the people who work alongside me, and the decisions of the families who have chosen the Urban Academy, along with the students for whom we center all of our work, has been unfairly subjected to an onslaught of half-truths, mistruths, and blatant lies. This misinformation campaign is designed to scapegoat charter schools for the public education system's failures. These failures have been brought upon by systemic racism, underfunding, special interests, politics, and poor legislative policy. Many charter school opponents intentionally ignore historical facts that the Commonwealth's public education system has been in a state of failure since it was created. Black and poor children, those with the most need, have been marginalized in the Commonwealth's public education system for more than 150 years. Therefore, it is impossible that the problems our system faces are a result of charter schools. There is not enough data to support that theory. However, there is more than enough evidence that these problems are deeply rooted in race, policy, and the pocketbook.

The practice of separate and unequal in Pittsburgh Public Schools began at the district's formation in 1835. By 1838 there were 12 schools in the district, five for white boys, five for white girls, one for white infants, and one for black boys and girls. The district did not hire its first Black teacher until 1937, 100 years after its founding. In its 1965 Annual Report, the Pittsburgh Public School District reported that the performance of many disadvantaged Black

children "in our schools is lower than the average performance of white children." In reading, children enrolled in schools where the students were mostly Black averaged as much as 4 to 5 1/2 years (grade equivalents) below children in schools that were substantially white. Sadly, this data is not very far off from what we are experiencing now. It has gotten worse, and charter schools are not to blame.

According to a 2019 report on Charter School Performance in Pennsylvania released by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Black students in poverty exhibit approximately 159 fewer days of learning in reading and 153 fewer days of learning in math than White students not living in poverty. Black charter students in poverty experience 124 fewer days of reading and 153 fewer days in math than White non-poverty Traditional Public School students.

The same report also indicates that Black charter students experience more remarkable yearly progress in reading while performing similarly in math compared to their Black Traditional Public School peers. The more substantial growth in reading for Black charter students compared to their Black peers translates to about 24 additional days of learning.

Imagine my constant state of frustration and sadness when schools like mine, that are providing greater outcomes for our students and have been chosen by mostly Black families who are trying to escape a proven system of failure, are charged with being the reason that school districts are failing and are called unaccountable to the public. It is, frankly, preposterous.

The Urban Academy's core philosophy is that ALL students, including disadvantaged students (particularly Black students), can achieve at high levels when immersed in an academically rigorous, challenging, culturally relevant, and innovative curriculum. At the center of this philosophy, three significant components are: 1) a climate of academic excellence; 2) knowledge of world cultures inclusive of an African-centered focus; and 3) a family/community support component. Our school believes in excellence without compromise and that in order to serve the student, we must support the family first. This has been our charge since our first school year in 1998. Our work results are proven by years of our school regularly meeting or exceeding the performance of similar students at the Pittsburgh Public School District.

Many charter opponents say charter schools are not public schools. That is a lie. Charter schools are defined by statute as public schools. Moreover, they are taxpayer-funded; non-sectarian; nondiscriminatory in enrollment; accountable to state and federal regulations and reporting requirements; and governed by a board made up of public officials, who are subject to the Sunshine Act, must comply with the PA Ethics Act which includes the filing of an annual Statement of Financial Interest.

Many charter opponents say charter schools take funding away from school districts. That is intentionally misleading. Charter schools do not take money from school districts. The money follows the student from their home school district to a public charter school where parents choose their child's public-school education to take place. In fact, charter schools receive on average 25 percent less funding than students in district schools.

Many charter opponents say charter schools are not accountable because they do not answer to the public since their boards are not elected. Charter schools are directly accountable to their authorizing school district or the Pennsylvania Department of Education, who have the authority to renew or revoke a school's charter.

The Urban Academy receives a thorough annual review from the Pittsburgh Public Schools' charter school office. Is the Pennsylvania State Board of Education or the PA Secretary of Education unaccountable? None of these individuals have been elected to those positions and yet they make decisions that impact the lives of 1.7 million public school students.

My teachers have been referred to by Nina Esposito-Visgitis, President of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, as not "real" teachers. However, my teachers were up and running a virtual program three school days following the Governor's March 13, 2020 mandated closure, and they have been back and working in the school building since the start of this school year. They demonstrated that they were willing to risk their lives to deliver a loving, caring, and compassionate learning experience in person. I do not know how much more "real" you can get than that.

There is clear evidence that the problems plaguing our education system are deeply rooted—most of them in racism and white supremacist ideology and practices. The way to make our system better is to direct resources where there is the most need and repeal practices and policies that advance inequity. All public schools should be authorized to develop or endorse alternative teacher accreditation programs to allow for increased diversity among the Commonwealth's teaching pool. All public schools should be funded based on their student and community needs, not the unfair, inequitable, and archaic PDE-363 form used to calculate charter school tuition (which allows districts to make 20+ deductions to our student's funding). Charter schools should be funded directly from the PA Department of Education (PDE), thereby not forcing school districts to "hurt" when the money passes through the district. AS in many other states, charter school law should allow for alternative authorizers such as colleges, universities and responsible non-profit agencies who are both objective<sup>3</sup> and without bias. The current process continues to perpetuate conflict and unfriendly rivalry between districts and charters.

Finally, you should know that I am a skeptic. I am skeptical of school districts and charter schools alike. My skepticism is deeply rooted in a crystal-clear understanding of the history and foundation of public education in America and my personal and familial experiences of Black people in this country, the city of Pittsburgh, and the Commonwealth. With that, I believe educational reforms and changes to PA's public-school statute, including the Charter School Law, are long overdue to ensure that everyone, specifically Black and poor students, has access to a free and appropriate, high-quality education.

Thank you for the opportunity to share thoughts and feelings on behalf of my school community. My parting wish for what you take out of these hearings are the words of charter parents because they have chosen schools that they believe are best for their children and families to escape a system that has been failing them for more than a century. I look forward to answering any questions you many have.