

Chairman Martin, Chair Lindsey Williams, Members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Stefaine D'Amico. I am the parent of two students enrolled at Agora Cyber Charter School. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you why I chose this school for my children, and why I oppose all funding cuts for public cyber charter schools.

Perhaps the most important thing I can say as a parent is that no school – virtual or brick and mortar – can be all things to all students. And, I don't think they should try. Instead, Pennsylvania should support a public education system that includes both strong traditional schools **and** fully supported public cyber charter schools.

My journey to understanding how important public cyber charter schools are and why school choice is so important began with my oldest son, Bobby. Beginning in kindergarten and continuing well into his middle school years, he was the victim of extreme bullying in two different schools. Bobby was beaten up in bathrooms, thrown into brick walls, called horrible names, had his clothes ripped and his belongings were stolen. While the actions of his classmates were tough, how school staff reacted to his situation was even harder to grapple with.

When Bobby was in 6th grade, we made the switch to Agora Cyber Charter School, and little by little, everything changed. This transition proved to be especially crucial because two years later Bobby's grandfather, the paternal influence in his life, passed away, leaving Bobby to be the man of the house and help raise his two younger brothers. With compassion and understanding, Bobby's 8th grade teacher even helped with the mourning of his grandfather. This personal touch addressing the individualized needs of each student is just another wonderful advantage of the cyber charter experience. I'll never forget how participating in his 8th grade talent show allowed Bobby to show off his talents – that's when he started to take off.

As that same 8th grade teacher at Agora will tell you, he came to her class quiet and reserved. She knew it would take some time to break down the walls that had been created because of what he experienced in previous schools. But she persevered because she knew it was all those things that brought him to a cyber school in the first place. She quickly realized his artistic talents and helped Bobby gain self-assurance, self-advocacy, and the ability to grow. Bobby especially liked how she wove art into his English assignments. In fact, it was a game-changer. His school work showed Bobby how much he had to offer, and he began sharing it.

Agora created a healthy environment that made him feel secure, and this allowed him to show all his gifts. Even though I don't regret for a minute my decision to enroll my three sons at Agora, it wasn't an easy path. Early on, my friends told me to steer clear of a cyber education. But within six months of moving to Agora, Bobby was thriving academically and he was free of the labels that plagued him in his previous schools.

While Bobby switched to Agora to escape bullying, we moved his younger brother Lathan to the school for entirely different reasons. The traditional brick and mortar setting was simply not a fit for his highly-academic inclination towards learning. As soon as we made the change, Lathan began to excel under Agora's focused curriculum. After seeing my two sons leave their traditional schools and thrive at Agora, sending my youngest child to Agora was a no brainer. Tate is an extremely active youngster, and I felt the cyber experience would be much better

suited for him, and it has been. I don't have to worry about him having to sit quietly in a classroom all day and instead get to watch him thrive in virtual classrooms with other students.

One last thought I want to share is that people sometimes think that students in a cyber setting are isolated and have no interaction with other students. Nothing could be further from the truth. All of my children (Bobby graduated last year) had synchronous learning opportunities. That means they were in classes at set times with other students.

In closing, I don't want to think about where my sons would be right now if I didn't have the opportunity to send them to a public cyber charter school like Agora. Whatever decisions you make as a result of these hearings, please do not cut funding for public cyber charter schools. They are so important for so many families and their children. Please give parents the opportunity to choose public cyber charter schools if they see them as the best option for their kids.

Thank you for allowing me to tell my story and for all the work you are doing to understand the educational needs of families and students in Pennsylvania.