

Pennsylvania Commission on Special Education
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Testimony by Nicholas Torres, CEO
Arthur D. Stevens, Special Education Director
Aimee Denton, Parent of Three Children with Special Needs
Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School

Introduction

I am Nicholas Torres, CEO of Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School. I would like to thank the members of the Commission for allowing me to present today. In attendance with me are Arthur Stevens, Special Education Director and Aimee Denton, parent of three of our students who have special needs.

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School Background

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School is the first publicly funded cyber charter school that specializes in meeting the individual needs of students with learning disabilities and/or differences. After receiving our charter in July 2012, Education Plus Academy began operation in September of 2012 for 250 Pennsylvania students. Education Plus Academy provides accessible, state of the art evidence-based educational interventions and services for children in combination with an interactive partnership with their families. Currently, Education Plus Academy serves approximately 500 students in grades K-8 and will incrementally include 9th to 12th grade during the next two school years.

It has long been accepted in the education community that early and specialized interventions for children with learning disabilities are critical to their overall future independence and self-sufficiency in life. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1991) describes learning disabilities as:

•“A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.”

Learning disabilities are neurologically based and most often do not present with notable physical symptoms. Appropriate and comprehensive assessment to determine the type and degree of disability with access to specialized instruction and services to maximize a student’s potential is of utmost importance. Without it, the majority of these students become limited in their ability to sufficiently read and write. The resultant effects minimize their ability to gain meaningful employment and to positively contribute to their community and society as a whole. According the Dyslexia Research Institute, 2013, these students account for part of the 44 million Americans who have the lowest literacy levels.

Over 7% of children in the United States have significant learning difficulties, and approximately 85% of these children struggle most with reading and language processing (comprehension and written expression). Approximately one in five students has a language-based learning disability (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2011). Dyslexia is the most common of the language-based learning disabilities affecting an estimated 10-15% of the population (Allen, 2010). Another 20% of the general population has features of dyslexia, such as the propensity to confuse visually and/or auditorily presented similar words, compromised reading comprehension and difficulties in written expression (vocabulary usage, spelling and meaningful content).

Pennsylvania, in particular, has a high demand for special education services. 15% percent of the state's enrolled students receive Special Education services, and as many as 50% of these students have been identified as Specific Learning Disability. Effectively differentiating instruction to meet the precise needs of students identified with a Specific Learning Disability is a difficult undertaking in existing traditional classroom environments. This is due, in part, to the range of student needs in a classroom that includes regular education students, special needs students and students at risk. This situation is further exacerbated by the emphasis on high-stakes testing outcomes and shrinking financial resources. Highly effective, evidence-based educational models found in private settings are most often out of the price range for the majority of Pennsylvania families. The tuition of a Pennsylvania private school specializing in students with a Specific Learning Disability is between \$25,000 and \$45,000 a year.

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School – A Blended Learning Model Approach

Prior to opening our school, a team of experts conducted extensive research on national and international best practices and evidence-based methods that successfully addressed the needs of students identified with a Specific Learning Disability. The research included a review of many recognized private schools that specialize in serving students with a Specific Learning Disability. From our research and examination of the targeted private schools, we developed our own comprehensive educational approach.

As stated in the Charter Application, Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School utilizes a model that integrates the virtual core curriculum with face-to-face, evidence-based learning. The virtual curriculum (encompassing the elements of the Core Curriculum) is individualized for each student via a mapped learning path based on normed assessment in combination with teacher directed individualized educational interventions.

In order for Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for its identified disabled population and to adhere to the provisions of each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), we found it necessary to offer a physical facility component for our students to engage in daily pragmatic language practice and social skill development with their peers. Additionally, in order to provide meaningful benefit, supplemental services such as Speech/Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy are systematically integrated across the curriculum throughout the school day to give students multiple opportunities for repeated, functional practice.

Our goals are straight forward and clear: (1) To meet our Federal obligations under the IDEA and Section 504, (2) To maximize the learning potential of each student, (3) To promote self-sufficiency and independence for each student and (4) To facilitate an ongoing interactive partnership with our families.

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School - Learning Centers

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School establishes small Learning Centers to ensure individualized attention and delivery of services for students and to enhance collaboration with families so that families can assist with the integration of learning at home. The Learning Centers provide each student with individualized support and essential services needed to improve specific areas in which a student is struggling and to nurture a student's unique skills and talents.

Students are not required to attend a Learning Center. The Core Curriculum may be accessed virtually in its entirety. However, most parents recognize the need for their child to attend a Learning Center to fully profit from our individualized program, and especially for the delivery of the provisions contained in their child's IEP. Parents also recognize that children learn best

through other children and their child's communication skills (pragmatic language) and socialization skills are of paramount importance to them.

Families that choose to access a Learning Center understand their responsibility to provide for transportation to and from the center. They also understand their responsibility to provide lunch, and manage their child's medication needs, if warranted.

To better understand how Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School blended learning model approach impacts students, Aimee Denton, a parent of three of our students with special needs will speak to her experience.

Parent Testimony

Hello my name is Aimee Denton I am the mother of Jude, Oliver and Alex Denton. My children all have learning disabilities and all have areas of strength and interest. We started our schooling in a traditional neighborhood brick and mortar school. My oldest son Jude who is now in 5th grade has Tourette syndrome with many of associated disorders including learning disabilities. He was in kindergarten in the neighborhood school until April at which time I pulled him out for his own well being and because there was not a better solution.

He went to another district school the following year repeated kindergarten and started with an IEP in place. He had a very hard time he was constantly up and down emotionally and struggled to keep up academically. He constantly called himself dumb. He is however a child who always has science books that he studies the pictures but could not read. In second grade he was in a constant state of stress I was called just about everyday. Because he has tourette's I

feel like he wears his heart on his sleeve and everyone knows when he is upset or stressed. It was offered by the district that we move him a third time to a social emotionally support class. He is a child who was suffering because his significant learning disabilities were not being met in an environment that was appropriate for him. He has a neurological disability and did not belong in the social emotional support class in a third elementary school. In March of second grade I pulled Jude out of the district school and started cyber charter school. Jude relaxed almost instantly being out of the school environment. He did his work on the computer with me by his side through all of his work because he could not do it without guidance and help. He completed second grade started third grade through cyber school at which point he was put into a special reading program that had a timed reading section that maxed out. Jude could not make the time and never could get to the next lesson it was frustrating for us both and obvious we needed to try something else.

We began homeschooling and he attended participated in different social groups but really missed the socialization that comes with school. Despite his difficulties he always loved school and really wanted to go back. I knew he needed a special education teacher to help him with his reading amongst other things. We began the process of testing and revamping his IEP. We were recommended a fourth elementary school in the district. I was, in the end, given everything I asked for on his IEP that even included a para educator. However, I knew in my heart that this child who is smart, loves science, and can speak intelligently about many topics was not going to make it. He should not need so many things and people in place just to make it through his day. So I began looking into alternative plans that included private schools despite the enormous expense. In the meantime, I was also worried about my two other children with learning disabilities who also need additional supports. I then was told about a new charter

school that was opening that fall that uses a blended approach of education and specializes in children with learning disabilities. I immediately called, spoke to Nick Torres, the Founder and CEO, and filled out the paper work for Jude to attend. I had my reservations since it was a new school with no past history just one person's vision.

When my husband and I went for our tour of the school location and met with Nick Torres and Arthur Stevens. We know this education model was going to be something really special. They were taking the best parts of cyber school, home school parental support, and face to face instruction and merging them together into a unique learning environment. Initially, I only had Jude, my oldest, enrolled. However, I had another serious issue with another child, Oliver who has a serious peanut allergy. He had three exposures in his district elementary school and the third one serious enough that his epipen was administered and he was taken to the hospital by ambulance. So based off these experiences I said what would you guys do if I wanted to enroll a kid with a peanut allergy. They said we would put into place a peanut free environment for the learning center. I asked my district to make things safer and they would not. It was clear we had to give this a shot with all three boys Jude going into 4th; Oliver 3rd; and Alex Kindergarten.

Putting my children in Education Plus Academy was the best decision I have ever made for my boys. On the first day at the learning center I was so nervous leaving my kids in strangers hands. They all came out talking about there wonderful experience. Later I found out that Jude started new tics screaming and spitting. What was different was that the teachers adapted the learning environment by talking to all the kids about Tourettes. The teachers took the first two weeks teaching these different kids about each other and supporting one another strengths and weaknesses. It is amazing to see this mix of kids, with all their differences, and how well they

get along and care about each other it is unique and extremely special. All the children have developed friendships and have learned to play and learn with each other. Kids who never had friends have friends and it is extraordinary.

The children's class sizes are small and all have mixed grades because the virtual curriculum has each child learning at his/her own academic level. Their teachers are all dual certified special ed and regular ed allowing them to accommodate the learning to what a child needs. Our teachers are creative, thoughtful and able to implement things quickly. Because of the virtual curriculum our children are all able to work at their particular levels and build upon what they are learning. The teachers are able to modify and change the children's work appropriately for each individual. Our teachers are able to work with our children in small groups while other children are doing work on their computers. The kids are all able to benefit and have their needs met while learning and growing in nurturing environment. My children are no longer struggling just to keep up they are truly learning and making notable progress. I never have anyone saying they are not smart enough. In the afternoon, our children participate in supplemental specials such as Yoga, Theater, Music, Dance, French, Art and Gym class.

My son Alex in Kindergarten last year was not responding as his teacher hoped to her language arts curriculum. Because of the learning center, she was able to put him and another child in a group and adapt the curriculum to their learning needs. I was certain he had the same level of learning disability as Jude. I believe because of what they did swiftly he will never suffer like Jude did. Alex is making progress and building because of this unique model. I feel certain Alex would never of had the same result had I just cyber schooled him in the traditional cyber model or if I had placed him in our district school. My district school could not have

adapted and modified his academics to suite his level and style of learning and continue to change with him while providing a supportive environment.

I wish frequently this school existed when we started school. My other children would have never experienced the hardships that they did and would never have thought they were dumb in their words. I am so grateful that they will have the years ahead to get to where they need to be in a safe small school environment where they utilize what is the best of all models of education to form their own unique model. My family and many others are so grateful to be a part of Education Plus Academy.

Student Outcomes for the First Year (2012-2013)

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School conducts formative math, reading and language arts testing for all students using the NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association – non-profit organization that provides Common Core aligned educational assessments) a nationally normed test, in order to measure academic proficiency and progress. In 2012-2013, Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School student population was composed of 43% identified disabled students with an IEP and 80% identified as having a low social economic status.

Results: In math, all grades exceeded the national average or growth for their grade, and students in all grades, except one, exceeded the projected growth rate. In reading, all grades, minus one, demonstrated growth in reading comparable to or exceeding the national average and four grades exceeded their projected growth rate. Overall, Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter students grew academically at a rate higher than their peers nationally. Notably, growth accelerated during the second half of the year. This kind of success, especially in a school composed of 43% learning disabled and 80% low social economic students, is unparalleled in

any public school nationally and is evidence that Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School's blended learning model approach is effective.

The Importance of Providing a Legal Definition for Learning Centers

For students with a Specific Learning Disability at Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School, the integration of best practices from both virtual and face-to-face learning was key to their success during the school's first year. In order to ensure the continued success of these students, it is essential for the legislature to enact a definition for learning centers that expressly states that learning centers are a supplemental service provided by cyber academies that treat a preponderance of children with learning disabilities. Without such legal protection, schools such as Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School that implement learning centers are vulnerable to attacks by those who fail to understand how learning centers are used and claim that the school is not a proper cyber school.

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School must be allowed to offer learning centers in order to maintain its ability to meet its Federal obligation to provide FAPE. As previously noted, the learning centers (physical facility) afford students with a disability the opportunity to engage in daily pragmatic language practice and social skill development with peers. The State cannot deny the nature of the learning centers for disabled students and cannot stand as a barrier to their access. FAPE cannot be developed in isolation; the learning centers are essential to Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School's capability to ensure FAPE.

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School monitors the ongoing progress of its students and provides data-driven instruction and interventions to assure that students with disabilities

receive a meaningful education. The school is legally obligated to provide a meaningful education under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 states that a public school must offer a Free Appropriate Public Education, defined as providing “regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet individual educational needs” of disabled students.

Most Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School students’ parents choose to have their children attend a learning center because the centers fully provide interactive instruction, integrated related therapies and specially designed instruction, as stated in a student’s IEP. Parents’ decisions regarding their students’ educational environment also take into account any potential unwanted or harmful effects on the student, and the quality and delivery of the program and services.

Pennsylvania Education Law and Policy Support Learning Centers

Pennsylvania’s statutory regulations for cyber charter schools do not require that all of the instruction must occur online, nor do they bar instruction at a physical location. A recent Basic Education Circular (BEC) on cyber charter schools provides a definition of a cyber charter school as a school in which a significant portion of its instruction is offered through electronic means and which does not require the student to be present at the physical facility except on a limited basis. Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School exceeds this definition, as its entire core content curriculum is provided in a virtual format. The purpose of the learning centers is to enhance the range of learning opportunities for students with disabilities and to provide an environment whereby students profit from their education as evidenced by their meaningful progress.

It is important to remember that Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School is not just a cyber school, but is a cyber charter school. The law governing creation and operation of charter schools was created with the intent of improving student learning, increasing learning opportunities, encouraging the use of different and innovative teaching methods and providing expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has stated that cyber charter schools in particular are intended to serve as “laboratories of innovation on behalf of all of Pennsylvania’s schools.” Cyber charter schools are expected to provide innovative educational opportunities beyond those currently in operation and offer alternative ways for students to achieve academic proficiency. Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School’s use of learning centers and the services provided in the centers provides an exemplary example of what cyber charter schools are intended to achieve. Pennsylvania should encourage the development of innovative and alternative methods of education such as that offered by Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School, especially when those methods are proven to be successful.

In closing, by employing a blended approach of virtual and face-to-face learning, Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School has been able to provide accessible, state of the art evidence-based educational interventions and services for children in combination with an interactive partnership with their families. This blended approach has been most successful as demonstrated in the data pertaining to the academic growth of our students. The learning centers are more than just essential for Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School to meet its educational obligations to students with disabilities. The learning centers provide services to which students with disabilities are legally entitled to have access, as well as fulfilling Pennsylvania’s educational policy of developing innovative ways to improve student learning. It is imperative

that the legislature enact a definition for learning centers that supports Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School's continued use of centers enabling us to meet our populations' unique needs and to adhere to all federal and state regulations regarding students with disabilities.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify today on behalf of our school and the hundreds and students and parents we serve.

Submitted by:

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