

Testimony Before the Special Education Funding Formula Commission

September 4, 2013

State College, PA

Dr. Maurice “Reese” Flurie

CEO, Commonwealth Connections Academy

Good morning and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Dr. Maurice Flurie III, and I have spent the majority of my career as an educator and administrator on the traditional education side before accepting the role as CEO of Commonwealth Connections Academy (CCA), a state-wide public cyber charter school. I am here today as an educator who has lived in both worlds. Hopefully I will be able explain to you, from both traditional and non-traditional perspectives, the complexities of special education funding.

CCA is one of the larger cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania. In fact, CCA has a student enrollment greater than that of 412 school districts in the Commonwealth. This year we will serve more than 8,000 students residing in 479 of Pennsylvania’s 500 school districts. This requires us to work with special education service providers throughout the Commonwealth. Our student demographics are virtually identical to the statewide averages, including our graduation rate of nearly 85%. Just over half of our student population is Free & Reduced Meal-eligible, and about 17% of our students have special educational needs. Despite these large numbers, CCA maintains a staff of 100% PA Certified Teachers, 44 of which are Special Education certified. Sixty-six total staff members are dedicated to the service of special education students. CCA’s overall student to teacher ratio is 23:1. CCA also maintains 8 Teaching Centers located across the Commonwealth with lease costs of **\$2.9 million** annually – and this does not include building maintenance or operating costs. These Teaching Centers are located in close proximity to the highest concentrations of CCA students, and ensure that students have equitable access to supplemental services such as tutoring and remediation across the state. To provide some context for our special education costs discussion, I would like to first present some foundational information about regular education costs at Commonwealth Connections Academy.

It is important to understand that, in cyber education, often times these costs are not less, but rather they are different from those incurred in “bricks and mortar” settings. For example, the average cost to develop a single online course is approximately **\$40,000**. CCA

currently offers 281 courses resulting in a cost of **\$11.2 million**. This does not include costs associated with the 25 additional virtual interventions and programs for students who struggle in math, language arts, or science; nor does it include costs associated with modifications for special education. CCA is also required as part of its charter, to provide and ship textbooks, computers, printers, ink cartridges and other materials to each student at a cost of nearly **\$15 million**, and this is before providing materials, specialized equipment, or support services for special education. In addition, as a requirement within CCA's charter, Internet reimbursement must be provided to all families at a cost of nearly **\$2 million**. One of the largest and uniquely costly undertakings in cyber education is meeting the requirements of PSSA and Keystone state testing. To comply with state testing requirements CCA must rent space in nearly 60 facilities across the state, in addition to securing hotel and transportation accommodations for staff to proctor exams and to ensure that none of our 8,000 students has to drive more than one hour to get to their testing location. The planning and execution of this process alone costs nearly **\$700,000**, and this does not include any modifications, extra staff or resources, or in-home services to meet the demands of students with special needs. It is important to note that, on average, cyber charter schools receive about 75% of the district's per student instructional costs. Among other things that are removed from funding to cyber charters is transportation. Obviously, many students with special needs require specialized transportation services for which the cyber charter is not reimbursed.

Since I have given you an overview of the baseline costs associated with cyber education, I will add to that the large costs associated with our students who have special needs and require additional equipment, staff, programs and resources. As was stated earlier, nearly 17% of CCA students have special needs. Our average funding per special education student is approximately **\$16,000**. In many cases with students in this category, the costs associated with these students far exceed the funding provided by the school districts; which have many times led to those students actually being referred to CCA by their district of residence - as CCA cannot deny enrollment. Here are just five (5) examples of students whose needs exceed the funding provided by his or her local school district:

Costs listed are the annual costs of services for each student in addition to school staffing costs.

Student #1 – **\$87,000** (Private Placement including OT, PT, and Speech/Language)

Student #2 – **\$74,800** (Private Placement including OT, PT)

Student #3 – **\$72,000** (Social Skills, Speech/Language, OT and PT)

Student #4 – **\$68,000** (Private services for Behavior Support, Speech/Language, and OT)

Student #5 – **\$57,400** (Private ESY, Speech/Language, OT, PT, Behavior Management)

In addition, some students have very intensive needs that must be contracted out to other providers. These services come at astronomical costs. You will notice in Attachment A that I have provided a list of costs for services from private providers as well as Intermediate Units. At CCA, we have had mixed results when attempting to contract with Intermediate Units for services. While we have successful contractual relationships with several IUs; others refuse to even enter into discussions concerning special education services. Also the cost for services at some IUs greatly exceeds what can be purchased from private entities. In these cases, just like many school districts, CCA contracts with private providers rather than the IU.

Refer to Attachment A

CCA also has a large number of students who require an alternative assessment for state testing purposes. This process also requires significant additional staff effort, resources, transportation, and in-home services to implement. The additional costs associated with this testing requirement alone are approximately **\$22,700**.

In 2012-13, seventy (70) CCA students received the Pennsylvania Alternative State Assessment (PASA) test. To deliver this assessment, twenty-two (22) full-time staff members conducted multiple individual testing sessions over the PASA Testing period. The State testing protocols require that each individual PASA testing session be video-taped and uploaded electronically to PDE for review.

As you have heard from testimony in each of the previous hearings by PASBO, PAIU and school representatives, this is a critical time in special education across all traditional and non-traditional sectors in education. What you may be surprised to hear is that we agree with much of that testimony, and echo a large amount of what other school officials have offered as CCA faces many of the same issues. We agree that:

1. State special education subsidies have flat lined over the past several years. Beyond the impact to local districts, this will affect charter and cyber charter schools even more so as they must wait to be reimbursed by the districts of residence. For example, as of the date of this hearing CCA still has over **\$11 million** in receivables owed from school districts for students served in the 2012-2013 academic year. If a district of residence does not reimburse, the charter or cyber charter must go through the process for reconciliation with PDE, which is a lengthy process. Despite all of this and regardless of the circumstances, the needs of all students who require costly services must not be disrupted.

2. Not much can be done to reduce costs associated with special education programs as they are prescribed by legislation at both the federal and state levels. This is a challenge for cyber charter schools as they must ensure equitable access across the Commonwealth to all students, even if that means providing additional resources, staff members and associated transportation costs to accommodate students directly in their home or private facilities.
3. Increasing numbers in special education student populations are shifting from lower cost disabilities, such as speech and language, to higher cost disabilities, such as autism support, and this shift in population is causing a shift in higher costs.

Parents of special needs children have told us that they decided to send their child to CCA for a myriad of reasons. For many it is because of dissatisfaction with services and lack of compassion provided by the previous school. Others selected CCA to protect their child from bullying brought about by other students seeing their special needs student as “different.” Many make this choice because their child is simply “stuck” somewhere in the IEP evaluation process.

In 2012-13, 18.1% of CCA’s newly enrolled students came to us out of compliance with Federal Special Education laws or with incomplete evaluations. These families were frustrated that more progress was not being made on their son’s or daughter’s individualized education plan (IEP). At CCA, we simply strive to fully comply with the law. In fact, CCA has even been able to move students out of IEP status due to our style of program delivery and other available non-special education student supports.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today. With the information I have provided to you, you can see the facts and figures associated with special education costs of cyber charter school students. As you can see, it is not less costly, but rather, just different and with many moving parts and additional factors. As an educational leader who has worked in both the traditional and non-traditional sides, I thank you for conducting these hearings to examine special education costs; which is an issue that has a severe fiscal impact on all sectors of public education.