

Testimony Regarding Senate Bill 335
Presented to the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee
Thursday, May 30, 2013

Good Morning, Senator Folmer, esteemed members of the Senate Education Committee, and guests,

My name is Dennis Tulli. I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about SB 335 and my related experiences in education. In advance of giving you my strong opinions about SB 335, I'd like to spend a few minutes reviewing my background and qualifications for my deeply-held views. I formerly served as both assistant superintendent and superintendent of the Lebanon School District from 1989 through 2002. From 2006 through 2011 I was CEO of Commonwealth Connections Academy, a cyber charter school. In my brief testimony today I hope to bring you an objective perspective to assist you as you make important educational decisions impacting families across Pennsylvania. I believe I can be objective not only because of my forty-four years of educational experience, but also because in those years I served as an educational leader in a traditional bricks and mortar school as well as a cyber charter school. I am also a Pennsylvania taxpayer, and a concerned parent and grandparent.

After retiring from Lebanon, I was asked to consult for a new cyber charter school, Commonwealth Connections Academy, which would be opening that year. While I was not a believer in cyber schools at the time, I took the job because I wanted to learn more about how such schools educated children online. I first served as a board member of the school from 2003 to 2006, and in 2006 I became CEO of the cyber school, Commonwealth Connections Academy. I watched our cyber school grow from 400 students in 2003 to over 7000 students today covering over 400 of the state's 500 school districts.

When I was superintendent of the Lebanon School District, I was an opponent of cyber schools. I was listening to the traditional organizations of my profession and was carrying their banner. I didn't like the competition we were facing: competition for both students and dollars. I found it very difficult to write a check to cyber schools every month for those students who left our school to attend a cyber school. You see, I was of the opinion that the check I wrote was our money, that it belonged to our school board. I also was upset to think that another school could educate our children using online strategies rather than those we were using at the time. I liked our monopoly fifteen years ago. We didn't have to worry about competition.

When families began pulling children out of our school, we were presented with an entirely different set of challenges. Parents could actually choose where they wanted to send their children to school? Heresy, I thought! You mean families who chose their own churches, doctors, banks, etc. could now choose their schools? Absurd! I thought about what was happening around the state and country and after much deliberation, I understood that school choice not only made sense... but that it was as American as apple pie. I have also realized that the mere existence of this competitive environment in education improves the quality of all schools. Why? Because now we are all competing for students and the funds which follow those students.

What do the voters of Pennsylvania think about charter schools and school choice? In a 2013 study conducted by the Susquehanna Polling & Research, Inc., seventy percent of families polled support an option of charter schools for Pennsylvania's children. Furthermore, in that same study, respondents strongly agreed that the school a child attends should not be determined by where that child lives. When asked if the money should follow the child to whatever school he or she chooses, fifty six percent of the families agreed that the funds allocated for that child should follow the child.

SB 335 is a dangerous and damaging bill for a number of reasons. First, SB 335 would eliminate funding from any cyber school when the resident school district unilaterally determines that it has a cyber option equal or better than the independent cyber schools. By doing this, it wrongly transfers the decision regarding what a quality cyber option is from the parents to the district. It effectively destroys choice for the parents which, as I stated earlier was found to be important to 70% of parents polled. This bill, if enacted, undermines the financial viability of schools that are effectively educating almost 40,000 children across Pennsylvania today. It also removes the parents from the decision of the best option for their children. This is fundamentally flawed and offensive.

Cyber schools already only receive about 75% of the funding allocated for every student in the resident district. The resident district keeps 25% of the funds they bring in as tax dollars to educate every child, but they do not educate the child going to a charter school which is not run by the district.

Over the past three years you have considered many proposals related to funding of charter schools. All of us would like to put this issue behind us and move on to other matters pertaining to quality education. To assist you, as you weigh all of the information placed before you, I recommend that you authorize a school funding commission similar to the virtual high school commission which was conducted about four years ago. A funding commission will ensure a fact-based discussion and policy recommendations about actual revenues, true costs, and expenditures of both cyber and bricks and mortar charter schools. This commission will give you a strong fact base of the costs and relative merits of these programs versus their school district counterparts, traditional public schools. With the facts which a commission would provide, you will have a basis for decisions you will make in the future relative to this recurring funding discussion.

I appreciate all you do for the children of this state and I remain committed to assist you at your request. Again, thank you for your time and the opportunity to address this committee on SB 335.