



Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools

Choice, Quality, and Accountability in Public Education

TESTIMONY
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING
NORTHERN LEBANON SCHOOL DISTRICT

May 30, 2013

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My name is Larry Jones and I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today as President of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools.

My comments will be brief and focus on one question and two words that seem to me to be appropriate in this discussion.

The question is why public education exists, and the words are Truthiness and Déjà vu.

As educators and legislators we constantly need to pull ourselves back from the passion of any debate and ask ourselves the fundamental questions why public education exists and whether or not what we are doing is consistent with that original purpose.

I contend that public education exists for two primary reasons - first, to provide an informed citizen base and second, to create a foundation for the future success of EVERY child in Pennsylvania. Both are essential to the continuation of our democracy and the economic well-being of the nation.

How well are we doing is a mixed report card.

The public school system in Pennsylvania was created as a monopoly. By that I mean parents were required to send their child to the school within the district in which they lived. If you had enough money, you could choose to move to a different district or pay for private school education. But if you did not have the resources to do either of those, choice was effectively denied to you. In 1997 and 2002 you, and your colleagues in the House, passed legislation that created other educational choices for parents – Act 22 for brick and mortar charter schools and Act 88 for cyber charter schools.

Since then, enrollment in those charter schools has grown at a rate of almost 10 percent per year as plotted in Exhibits 1 and 2 which show the number of charter schools growing from zero to 180 and the number of students to more than 115,000 in the last school year. These schools have grown because

they are meeting a real and unmet need in public education. It is also a strong indicator that the existing system was not effectively addressing the second reason why public education exists – to serve ALL our children. This is a need defined, not by any of us who operate charter schools, nor anyone here who works in a traditional school, nor even any legislator. It is a need identified by the parents who have made the informed decision that the charter school option provided the best, and sometimes only, alternative for their child.

Most traditional public schools are doing a good job, but our charge as educators is to provide a safe environment for learning and a good education to EVERY child, not just those who thrive in the traditional environment. Parents, better than anyone else, know when they see failure and know when they see hope. Charter schools are filling a fundamental need, providing that hope, saving taxpayers money, and saving children's lives.

And that very success is the reason why cyber charter schools are being challenged, because their existence has become a perceived threat to the traditional schools. There is no question that some charter schools have violated the trust and faith placed in them. That *is* justification for fixing those situations and closing down under performing charter schools – are actions which we support, but that *is not* justification for crippling or killing all cyber charter schools which is the true, but unstated, reason behind much of the proposed legislation in the House and Senate.

Our organization stands unapologetically for choice for parents, quality for children, and accountability for taxpayers in public education. It is our perception that when you look closely at SB 335 it stands for none of those principles. The reasons provided for its introduction sound reasonable and worthy of support. But the phrase “the devil is in the details” was never more true.

This gets me to my first word - “Truthiness”. It was coined by comedian Stephen Colbert in 2005 and refers to an argument or assertion based on intuitive or “gut” feeling without regard to counter evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts. It's the idea that passion, emotion, and certainty have replaced analysis, information, and rational discussion on public issues. It is a selfish and disrespectful form of public discourse that has become too common in American life. Mr. Colbert originally applied it to political debate in Washington, but it is just as appropriate to educational issues in Harrisburg.

How does Truthiness apply here?

The key section of SB 335 states “If a public school district offers a cyber-based program equal in scope and content to an existing publicly chartered cyber charter school and the student in that district attends a cyber charter school instead of the district's cyber-based program, the school district shall not be required to provide funding to pay for a student's attendance at a cyber charter school.”

Sounds reasonable, doesn't it. But look at the details.

Who determines if the district's program is “...equal in scope and content ...”? The district? If so, or even if it's the Department of Education, SB 335 guts Act 88 by transferring the choice for that child from the parent to a bureaucratic entity. More fundamentally, the bill *assumes* the reason for a parent wanting

an alternative has everything to do with the scope and content of the program offering and totally ignores the fact that most parents leave the traditional schools for cybers for a myriad of reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with program offerings. A safe and constructive environment in which a child is enabled to learn is at least as important as the programming and content, but this legislation ignores the importance of that fundamental prerequisite.

This is a prime example of making absolutely no attempt to understand what a high-quality cyber school does, how they educate children, what their real cost structure is, or why parents are choosing them over traditional schools. What this legislation really is, is a proposed solution to a district complaint that ignores demonstrated parent and student needs and, as such, runs counter to a primary reason for the existence of public education - to provide effective education to ALL our children.

Let's be honest, this legislation does nothing to save taxpayer money, or improve education in Pennsylvania. Its sole purpose is to keep more money in the district, maintain the status quo, and destroy real choice for parents.

Let's review a few real facts.

Exhibit 3 shows that just 6.5 percent of the more than 1.7 million children in public education in this state are in charter schools, yet they account for only 3.8 percent of the cost. They are the best deal in public education in Pennsylvania.

Of the 494 districts that have students in cyber schools, half refuse to pay the cyber charter schools for those students.

In addition to the 115,000 students in charter schools, there are an additional 44,000 on waiting lists to get in.

Neither cyber or brick and mortar charter schools are the right option for every child, or even a majority of the students in Pennsylvania, but EVERY parent should have the opportunity to make an educational choice that is right for their child. It is my sincere belief that this legislation will effectively eliminate independent cyber school education from that list of options.

And this gets me to my second word, *Déjà vu*.

Over the past two-and-a-half years, the General Assembly has spent a lot of time hashing out issues of charter school accountability and transparency, while seeking to come up with a good funding solution that is fair to all children. The vast majority of the proposed legislation introduced in both the Senate and House ignores all that work and offers ill-conceived and one sided cuts with few positive reforms. Left unaddressed in SB 335, and other legislation, are the issues of strong independent authorizers, longer terms that would save taxpayer dollars, amendments to charters, equity on transportation and facilities funding as well as accountability and transparency measures that are welcomed by the charter community.

What we really need is comprehensive educational reform legislation that is strategic in its vision, comprehensive in its scope, intelligent in its approach, equitable in its distribution of resources, and designed ALWAYS with the best interests of our children at the apex of its priorities. In the last 18 months, there have been three attempts to achieve exactly that and all have failed.

All of us testifying today can offer numbers and counter numbers to support our positions. But what your decision must come down to is what is best for our children – ALL of our children. The simple fact is that some parents, who are also taxpayers, are drawn to cyber schools because they see them as a more effective and viable option for their child. In their eyes, cybers are the only hope they have for the future of their child.

All districts need to do is listen to what their parents are saying and change to meet the needs of their children. Not only would that solve every one of the complaints that districts have about charter schools, it would improve the education system for every child in this state. Some schools districts are listening and changing, but many have chosen instead to circle the wagons, defend the status quo, and attack. I sincerely believe that such a position is both short-sighted, and not in the ultimate best interests of our children or our state.

The fact is that cyber charter schools are needed and working. Yes, some improvements need to be made to make them even better, but as educators, legislators and adults, we need to get away from being locked in this battle for money at the expense of what is best for our children. We must use the tax dollars entrusted to us by the taxpayers to become what we can, and should, be – leaders who enable the creation of high quality educational opportunities for EVERY child in Pennsylvania.

Thank you.