



August 22, 2011

The Honorable Jeffrey E. Piccola
Majority Chair, Senate Education Committee
Senate Box 203015
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3015

The Honorable Andrew E. Dinniman
Minority Chair, Senate Education Committee
Senate Box 203019
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3019

Dear Senator Piccola and Senator Dinniman,

My name is Marc Mannella and I am the CEO/Founder of KIPP Philadelphia Schools. KIPP – the Knowledge is Power Program – is a national network of free, open-enrollment, college preparatory public charter schools. There are 108 KIPP schools in 22 cities, including 4 in Philadelphia. Hallmarks of the KIPP program include an extended day and year (our students attend school from 7:30-5 on weekdays, from 9-12 every other Saturday, and for 3 weeks in the summer); a relentless focus on results; and a unifying goal of getting all our students to and through college.

I humbly submit this testimony not as a policy expert or a charter school advocate, but as a career educator who has been a teacher, a principal, and now CEO of a network of public schools that employs 108 people and serves 1000 students:

The legislative intent of the charter law in 1997 was to create hubs of innovation and allow parents to exercise choice in deciding which schools to enroll their child. The broad appeal of charter schools initially was a promise of more autonomy in exchange for more accountability. Fourteen years and 157 charter schools later, it is both appropriate and necessary to evaluate how Pennsylvania is doing.

Any honest assessment of charter schools in Pennsylvania will reveal that the record is mixed. There are schools that are proving every day that demography does not equal destiny; that low-income and minority students can achieve at levels at or above their affluent peers if they are provided with a world-class education; that students like Dina

who entered KIPP scoring in the 7th percentile on a national norm-reference assessment and graduated 4 years later in the 91st percentile don't lack intelligence, but rather access to a good education. Then there are schools that fail to educate children effectively and betray the public trust by playing games with their enrollment and/or mismanaging tax payer dollars.

At KIPP, we believe promises to children are sacred. The sheer existence of persistently low-performing schools proves that the promise of more autonomy for more accountability has not yet been realized.

As this Committee reviews SB904, I encourage you to consider the following provisions that will allow the Commonwealth to fulfill its promise of creating an accountable charter movement that enables high-performing charter schools to flourish, and either helps to improve, or shuts down the low performers.

- ***Design a state-wide performance metric:*** SB904 calls for the creation of a 7-member commission to oversee charter and cyber charter schools. The first priority of the commission should be designing a performance metric that assesses schools based on fair, objective, and transparent criteria. The metric should provide a holistic assessment of school performance by measuring the following: PSSA scores (both absolute and value-added), alignment to the charter's mission, and student attrition. A charter school that has great test scores but kicks out its challenging students is not a good school. To put it simply, it's not the job of the student to fit the needs of the school; it's the job of the school to fit the needs of the student. At times, some charter schools forget this and "counsel out" students in large numbers. At KIPP, we post our student attrition data on our website because we believe it is as important an indicator of our school's overall health as our test scores.
- ***Remove barriers to entry for enrollment:*** School choice means that parents choose schools and not vice versa. Besides counseling students out, some charter schools try to gain advantage by manipulating the enrollment process through acts like requiring parents to interview or asking for a burdensome amount of information on the enrollment form. These practices are in direct conflict with charter schools' legal obligation to be open-enrollment. One way to curb this is for the commission to design a uniform enrollment form that is simple and user-friendly for parents. At KIPP, we go out into the community and canvass neighborhoods to distribute enrollment forms because we know that if we sit back and wait for parents to come to us, then only the most motivated parents will enroll their children. We believe this is why our population of special-education, low-income, and minority students is commensurate with the district-operated schools in the communities we serve. All large school districts have

magnet schools that set admission criteria based on attendance, academic performance, and/or behavior records. If the charter movement is to stay true to its aspirational aim of increasing educational equity, then the charter law needs to actively work to prevent the creation of “magnet charter schools” by removing barriers to entry in the enrollment process.

- **Permit multiple authorizers:** The state should permit universities and other qualified institutions to authorize charter schools. It is impossible to have a quality charter movement in Pennsylvania without effective authorizers because these entities are responsible for managing charter applications, renewals, modification requests, revocations, and providing overall performance management and support. States like New York and Georgia that have multiple authorizers were motivated to do so because of the following factors:
 1. They felt an inherent conflict of interest in a local school board authorizing what is essentially their competition. This breeds distrust and fosters an antagonistic relationship between the charter school and the home district.
 2. They felt school districts lacked the capacity to provide adequate oversight. In Philadelphia, for example, there are over 70 charter schools serving about 40,000 students being monitored by a staff of less than 5 people in the District's charter office.
 3. Political realities made it very difficult for a local school district to shut down an underperforming charter school. Every charter school resides in a legislative district. Local school boards are understandably hesitant to shut down schools supported by elected officials who vote in a body that controls their revenue.

A strong independent authorizer will have the courage to shut-down low performing schools, the capacity to adequately support struggling schools, and the ability to expand high-performing schools.

However, there is a reasonable fear that multiple authorizers could lead to an exponential growth in charter schools that will be difficult to oversee, thereby leading to *less* accountability. It is thus imperative that the state commission hold the authorizers accountable to the performance of their portfolio of schools.

- **Facilities funding:** SB904 calls for establishing a committee to make recommendations to the General Assembly on how to make charter funding more equitable. While I strongly encourage the committee to thoroughly

analyze all aspects of charter school finance ranging from how districts calculate their charter per-pupil rate to how to ensure special education costs are better aligned with expenditures, an immediate priority for charter schools in this fiscal climate is to have access to state funds for facilities. Last year at KIPP Philadelphia, we spent 12% of our operating budget to pay rent at our 3 buildings. In 15 states – including Massachusetts, D.C. and Colorado -charter schools have access to generous facility funding. In these difficult economic times, *all* schools must learn to operate within its means and find creative ways to reduce expenditures. But it is the responsibility of the Commonwealth to ensure that its limited resources are allocated equitably.

SB904 already contains many of these suggestions, and I applaud the Committee for its commitment to working to improve the charter law and create more high-quality options for Pennsylvania's children. We believe what makes KIPP great is not that we have all the answers, rather that we are willing to ask all the tough questions and do whatever it takes to get better. And that's exactly how we hope this Committee will approach reforming our charter law. Ask all the tough questions and do whatever it takes to make it better.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Mannella', with a stylized, cursive script.

Marc Mannella
CEO/Founder
KIPP Philadelphia Schools