



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony

Senate Education Committee

Charter Schools

Executive Deputy Secretary Amy Morton

Department of Education

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Good morning, Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you regarding charter schools in Pennsylvania. Secretary Tomalis regrets that he was unable to attend today's meeting due to a prior commitment, however, he asked me to share with you his support of charter schools, as well as charter reforms and expanding charter opportunities. The Secretary believes this is an important discussion since it is essential to grow and expand quality charter schools to provide increased educational opportunities for our students.

Quality charter schools are a highly valued option of school choice in the education marketplace. They are innovative options that many parents choose for their children as they have done in 38 states. They are also widely supported by parents, students, the business community and leaders from both sides of the political aisle, on the state and national levels, from former President Bush to President Obama. Since 1997, the Commonwealth has supported the creation and sustainability of charter schools, and as a result, there are currently 159 brick-and-mortar and 13 cyber charter schools serving over 90,000 students. Public charter schools introduced the vital element of competition into what had been a monopoly by our traditional public schools in providing education to children at no additional cost to their families. Last year, 5 percent of school-age students were enrolled in charter schools. Innovative solutions that modify some of the current barriers to charter school growth, such as establishing a strong statewide authorizer, can facilitate family access to more public school choices in the coming years.

The impact of charter schools in the public school arena is evident through a few examples that have proven beneficial to tens-of-thousands of students. For example, the introduction of cyber charter schools has influenced an accelerated inclusion of more online learning opportunities within traditional public schools. This is an excellent illustration of how the injection of competition and choice in public education has helped both public charter school and traditional public school students. Cyber charter school enrollments have tripled from more than 9,000 students in 2004-05 to nearly 28,000 in 2010-11.

The seeds planted for charter school creation in Pennsylvania took root more than a decade ago, and growth has been rapid. As we have witnessed the student charter population climb, we have also recognized the need to grow smartly, strengthening and expanding opportunities for education choice through charters.

Like their traditional public school counterparts, some of Pennsylvania's charter schools can boast of an excellent record of performance while others appear to continue to struggle with children reaching expectations. But the shortcomings of a few should not discredit our many successful charter schools, nor should they diminish the significant accomplishments of those who have demonstrated the value of common sense approaches to educating children. Robust learning communities that have the results to prove their value in the currently limited spectrum of public education choice need to be encouraged, not discouraged.

Successful charter schools, as well as many traditional public schools, often know what needs to be done to help improve student performance. However, one key advantage is that

charter schools, unlike traditional public schools, have greater flexibility to implement those changes. The difference is often in the degree to which the school's administration is hamstrung by statutory and regulatory requirements, or elements of collective bargaining agreements that may be too costly to overcome. All high-performing public schools – charter and traditional – set themselves apart from others by demonstrating the will and the skill of strong leadership, tackling tough challenges by utilizing all available resources toward the single focus of educating children. Effective school systems, including our best charter schools and our best traditional public schools, are designed to meet the needs of the children they serve, not the “wants” of the adults who work within them.

The Administration supports comprehensive reform to the Commonwealth's charter school law that:

- (1) Establishes a statewide authorizer
- (2) Ensures accountability, transparency and performance of charter operators
- (3) Provides for the conversion of district schools to charter schools
- (4) Provides opportunities for successful operators to expand
- (5) Establishes a task force to review charter funding issues
- (6) Increases the accuracy and efficiency of charter school payments

1. Establishment of a statewide authorizer

Current law provides for a local school district board of directors as the initial authorizer of a brick-and-mortar charter and PDE in the case of a cyber charter school. A charter proposal denied by a school board can be appealed to the Charter Appeals Board chaired by the Secretary

of Education. The Administration supports streamlining the process for charter applications and increasing the quality of approved charters by establishing an independent statewide authorizer. The independent statewide authorizer would approve traditional brick-and-mortar and cyber charters in the Commonwealth. The statewide authorizer, designed to have expertise in educational programming, performance and financial management, would approve charter applications and renewals. The Administration supports allowing a local board of school directors to continue to authorize charter schools within its boundaries should it decide to continue to do so.

2. Increased accountability and transparency

As public entities, charter schools must be accountable to the taxpayers, parents and students they serve. Therefore, the Administration supports increasing the transparency and accountability of charter school operators by requiring charter school officials to comply with the relevant provisions of the Commonwealth's ethics and financial responsibility laws. The establishment of a statewide authorizer will also help to ensure quality by requiring charters to contain academic performance targets. The authorizer should also have the ability to revoke the charter of any school that is not meeting the requirements of the law or that cannot meet specified academic performance targets.

3. Conversion of district schools

Current charter law provides for the conversion of a school to a charter school when 50 percent or more of the parents and teachers within the school apply to the school district board of directors to do so. Under these requirements, only one conversion charter school – Lincoln

Charter School in the York City School District – has been established in the 14 years that the law has been in effect. The Administration believes that it is important to provide more opportunities for schools to convert to charter status particularly when there is a demonstration of local support. Therefore, the Administration supports a parent-centered approach to conversion of schools by providing a parent trigger that allows for a conversion when more than 50 percent of the parents in a school petition the school board to convert to a charter.

4. Operation of multiple sites under a single charter

Currently, a charter school is authorized to operate at a single site. No additional campuses are permitted under a single charter; consequently, if a charter operator chooses to open additional campuses, then each individual campus must have its own charter. The Administration supports the concept of multiple campuses with a single board of trustees for those charters that have achieved solid academic performance and adherence to fiscal and other reporting requirements. Charter school operators that have a proven track record of increasing student achievement and that attract students to their curriculum should be offered a streamlined process to allow them to replicate their model in multiple locations to offer more choices to students.

5. Charter funding task force

The Administration supports the establishment of a task force, chaired by the Secretary of Education, to study charter school funding and review issues associated with charter school financing. The task force would review current charter funding formulas and processes, and make recommendations on how charter funding should be structured in Pennsylvania. The task

force would receive administrative and technical assistance from the Department of Education and issue a report of its findings.

6. Accurate and efficient charter payments

The Administration supports a revised payment mechanism that will increase the accuracy and efficiency of charter school payments. Under current law, charter schools invoice local districts for tuition owed for students who are served by a charter school. When a district fails to pay that bill, or there is a discrepancy, the Department of Education must get involved and there can often be a significant delay in resolving the payment issue. The Administration recommends the implementation of a direct pay system in which the department, not local school districts, will make payments directly to the charter school serving the student. Such a procedure should eliminate the delay and financial difficulties that plague the current system.

The Administration believes these six reforms can form the foundation of a proposal to improve the quality and accountability of the Commonwealth's charter schools.

Charter schools are successful educational models in Pennsylvania and nationwide, not an experiment as they were considered at their inception. They have not destroyed public education as some claimed when we first established charter schools in the Commonwealth, but have rather greatly improved education throughout the state.

We look forward to the opportunity to work with the General Assembly to further develop a robust charter system in the Commonwealth that provides enhanced educational choice

to parents and students. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee and I welcome any questions.