



Testimony on Senate Bill 904

National Heritage Academies
August 25, 2011

Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the invitation to offer written testimony on Senate Bill 904. At National Heritage Academies (“NHA”), we know and respect that you have many difficult choices ahead as you strive to create new school choices for Pennsylvania families. We would be proud to help be part of the solution. We would be honored to have the privilege of working in partnership with you to help best meet the needs of students of the Commonwealth.

We appreciate this opportunity to tell you about NHA and to offer comments on Senate Bill 904.

NHA’s Mission and Vision

First, to summarize our purpose and vision in a single sentence:

NHA seeks to better educate more children, and we believe each student should be challenged to achieve.

Those hopes and beliefs have driven us since 1995, when NHA was founded to partner with community leaders who were creating Excel Charter Academy – one of Michigan’s first public charter schools.

Today NHA partners with 71 charter schools in nine states – Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin – serving more than 44,000 students in kindergarten through 8th grade. Since 1995, NHA has invested more than \$400 million in communities where our partner schools are located. These communities include Detroit, MI, Baton Rouge, LA, Atlanta, GA, Queens, NY, Brooklyn, NY, and Gary, IN.


Each of these public charter schools is governed by an independent public board. We work in partnership with these boards to deliver our academic program and to help ensure each school’s academic, organizational, and financial viability. Each of these public schools are open to all students, and if demand for seats exceeds supply, a random selection drawing is held. In fact, we usually have more interested students than we do spots for them. All told, approximately 14,000 students are on waiting lists to attend a NHA partner school.

Our Four Pillars

Our schools offer students a structured educational experience within a safe and secure environment guided by these four key pillars:

- Academic excellence.
- Character education.
- Parental partnerships.
- Student responsibility.

In our classrooms, we offer students everything you would expect to see in any high-quality school. We teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Of course we also teach history, art, music, physical education, and even advanced mathematics courses. We offer a full range of special education services to



students who need them. We serve public charter schools that are open to all students. We wouldn't want it any other way.

This rigorous academic program is based on 30 years of school research. Our curriculum doesn't only meet state standards. It meets our own higher standard: college readiness. We want every student who leaves the 8th grade at an NHA partner school to be ready for a rigorous high school experience that will prepare them for college. We know some students will choose career paths outside of college, but that should be a choice based on their career aspirations, not a choice made for them by inadequate preparation.

Academic success requires not just a strong curriculum but also a robust culture for learning. So we foster an environment of mutual trust and respect that re-enforces values of good citizenship by recognizing students for displays of their character.

For example, our classrooms are “self-managed.” That means students agree on how they will behave and what behavior they will expect of others. Adults at each school model that behavior, and they focus purposefully on building relationships between adults and students that will facilitate student learning.

To encourage parental involvement, all of our partner schools have “parent rooms” – dedicated rooms for parents to use any time they want for meetings, coordinating volunteer activity, using the Internet, or studying to advance their own educations.

Testing and Evaluation

Many students walk in our doors well below grade-level proficiency. In fact, new students in 2nd through 8th grade this year were, on average, at the 26th percentile nationally (i.e., near the bottom quartile of achievers in the country among their age groups). This is the gap in achievement that our schools are designed to close and can only be accomplished by accelerating student academic growth.

To ensure that our program delivers results for students, we test student knowledge throughout the year in many ways. For example, all students at NHA partner schools take the Measures of Academic Progress assessments several times a year. This helps teachers and school leaders understand students' academic baseline, academic progress, and areas in which they need help learning. Teachers and school leaders can use this data immediately to modify and tailor instruction for each individual student.


On average, our students' academic growth rate is 133% and, during the last five years, NHA partner schools ranked in the top 25% of U.S. schools for academic growth. For the 2009-10 school year, state test results show NHA partner schools with greater proficiency than local schools some 74% of the time. (This figure includes schools in their first year of operation without an opportunity yet to show growth over time.)

We are pleased, but not satisfied, with these results. They show that the achievement gap can and will be closed over time. But we know more must be done to better educate more children and challenge all students to achieve. We refine our program and our approach constantly. We replicate successes in other schools. We phase out what doesn't work as well.

Comments on Senate Bill 904

We are encouraged by Senate Bill 904, both because it affirms that charter schools are an important piece of Pennsylvania's system of public schools, also because it recognizes the contributions that a robust charter sector can make in the Commonwealth.

Elements we believe make this bill strong are:

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- State Commission on Charter Schools and Cyber Schools. The Commission that would be created by this bill would have powers similar to statewide authorizers in other states. Because their structure allows them to carry forward their specialized mission of chartering schools, we have found that statewide authorizers with a higher degree of independence allow for quality growth in the charter sector.
 - Process. The Commission's structure provides charter school founders with an option to directly apply to the Commission for a charter. Motivated local school boards can serve as quality authorizers, but providing the option to directly apply to a statewide authorizing body creates opportunities for opening schools in areas of the Commonwealth currently not served by charters.
 - Independent Boards. All charter school boards that partner with NHA function independently. This includes hiring independent legal counsel and auditors. The care taken in this bill for independence is both reasonable and prudent.

We also are encouraged that the bill contemplates allowing charter school boards to partner with educational management service providers, such as NHA, to provide for the day-to-day operations of the school. We would like to offer ourselves and our experience working across multiple states as a resource to the committee to help ensure these partnerships provide autonomy, while also being held accountable, to best meet student needs.

Conclusion

For the last 16 years, our greatest honor has come from parents – who ask us to teach their children. We appreciate the opportunity to share information on NHA, and provide comments on Senate Bill 904.

In closing, we would like to extend an offer to each of you to come and visit a school partnering with NHA. We would like you each to know that we would be honored to have you come see first-hand the positive impact our dedicated leaders, teachers, and staff, are having on one of our nation's most precious resources – students – the next generation of community, business, medical, political – and of course – educational – leaders in our great state.

For further information, contact:

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