



**PA Senate Education Hearing
April 12, 2021**

**Testimony of Jane Swan, CEO
Reach Cyber Charter School**

Good morning Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Jane Swan and I am the CEO for Reach Cyber Charter School. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the need for K-12 educational reforms with you today.

Five years ago, in August 2016, Reach opened its doors with 16 staff members and 463 students with a mission to help each student maximize his or her potential. Our goal is to meet the highest performance standards and provide each student with a uniquely individualized learning program, through flexible pacing and 21st Century learning, including STEM opportunities. In June 2020, Reach completed our fourth year with nearly 300 staff members and 3,885 students. Due to the popularity of public cyber charter schools and parent demand for robust, comprehensive virtual education during the COVID pandemic, today Reach is educating 8,747 students across the Commonwealth and has 600 staff members to serve our influx in students.

Our goal is to prepare every student for a successful future, regardless of where that future may take them. As I previously mentioned, we place a strong emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education and I am proud of the innovative efforts of our staff to get our students interested in these subjects. This year over 2,200 students attended virtual back-to-school events with educators and students participating in grade-level STEM activities. So far this year, more than 3,000 students have participated in the 30+ STEM camps that our staff have developed. These camps include Coding, 3D Printing, Science Behind Art, Weather STEM and PennDOT Challenge, where our team **won the District 8 competition** and placed **3rd in the state last year** for developing an app to get users involved in community cleanup in a fun way!

With advances in STEM constantly evolving, it is also important to ensure our staff have opportunities for robust professional development. Currently, we have 22 staff members participating in the Reach Opportunity for Innovation program, where teachers practice implementing cutting edge technology in their classroom, including Write Away Whiteboard Math, Visualizing Geometry with 3D Printing, Globe STEM Research and Collaboration, Math STEM with Minecraft, Mindstorm Lego Robotics and Minecraft Education.

Unfortunately, our vision to inspire and nurture future success for all students is sometimes diminished when our students are not afforded the same opportunities as students in school

districts. Dual enrollment and dual credit for public charter school students is one of the K-12 educational reform issues we would like to see addressed.

Many students graduate from school districts with college credits through dual enrollment agreements made between accredited postsecondary institutions and school districts. Dual enrollment is celebrated by K-12 educators and postsecondary leaders as a way to introduce advanced coursework to students and lower tuition rates for students planning to attend college. Dual enrollment programs are strongly supported by Governor Wolf who made it a point to include growing the number of dual enrollment programs as a goal in PA's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan.

Despite the support, PA's public charter school students are prohibited from participating in dual enrollment programs. Per the Dual Credit Program Toolkit for PA School Entities issued by the Department of Education in December 2017, "Charter schools – both brick-and-mortar and cyber charter – are not permitted to enter into dual credit agreements because the Charter School Law does not grant this authority. Charter school students may enroll independently in college coursework. However, the coursework may not be applied toward high school credit or graduation requirements and the student is responsible for covering tuition and related costs."

Currently, there is a major flaw in PA's Charter School Law that prohibits public charter schools from entering into dual enrollment agreements with postsecondary institutions. Last session, Rep. Jim Marshall's legislation to correct this flaw (HB358) passed the House with bipartisan support but stalled in the Senate. Rep. Marshall and Sen. Bartolotta have reintroduced this legislation and I hope that both chambers will act on these bills in the coming months so we can begin offering dual enrollment to our students in the upcoming school year.

Another disadvantage that public charter school students have is a lack of equitable access to PA's Career and Technical Centers (CTC). Currently, school district students are able to attend CTCs for vocational and career training, and the school district of residence must pay for this education. However, if a student attending a public cyber charter school wishes to enroll full-time or part-time in a CTC that student's district of residence is no longer responsible for making the tuition reimbursement payment for this student. Instead, the cyber charter and CTC must establish an appropriate charge for charter school students. The CTCs typically charge public charter schools a higher rate than they charge school districts, we would like to see that change. Charter school students are public school students and should have the same access to career and technical education opportunities as their peers in school districts.

Another constant hurdle that public charter schools have to overcome, both brick-and-mortar and cyber, is the fact that we only receive 75 percent of the funding that school districts receive per student. School districts keep 25 percent of the funding for charter students even though they are being educated at the public charter school. In some school districts (like Philadelphia, Harrisburg and Pittsburgh), the percentage withheld is between 36 and 40 percent.

Public cyber charter schools have our own unique costs, serving a diverse population throughout the state, which include mailing technology and equipment to every student, and providing special education services to students by entering into agreements with numerous local

providers. Additionally, we must rent space across the state to administer state PSSA, Keystone and PASA assessments. Our students are as diverse as Pennsylvania itself, which is why a flat tuition rate for cyber charter students is not equitable or fair to our students and their families who pay local property taxes. Our families deserve to see their local property taxes reflected in the amount of funding that follows their children to their public charter school.

Noting these inconsistencies in the law, we would like to propose ***no funding cuts for any public school students***, including all district and charter school students. We understand that education funding is always a controversial topic and it is not one that PA's public charter school community has shied away from in the past. We believe that any discussion about cyber charter school funding should occur as part of a holistic analysis of public education funding.

In addition, the public charter school community would like to see the charter application, approval, renewal and amendment processes standardized so that schools aren't waiting years for action by their authorizer. We would like direct pay for all public charter schools so that charters are not forced to go through a lengthy process to get their funding redirected from the PA Department of Education when school districts refuse to pay tuition reimbursements. We would like to shift the power to nominate individuals to the Charter Appeal Board (CAB) from the governor if he or she fails to act within a reasonable time. Finally, we would like to strengthen accountability and reward innovation across ALL public schools in PA. I encourage you to review the [Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools' 2021 Legislative Agenda](#) for more information about these priorities.

Again, I would like to thank the Senate Education Committee for holding this hearing and for inviting me to participate. I am happy to answer any questions you may have and I look forward to a robust roundtable discussion.