

Testimony before the Special Education Funding Formula Commission
September 4, 2013
State College, PA

Lawrence F. Jones, Jr.
CEO, Richard Allen Preparatory Charter School

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and thank you for asking me to appear before you today on a very important and complicated subject. I applaud your efforts to try to bring equity and fairness to special education funding.

In addition to my role as CEO of the Richard Allen Charter School in Southwest Philadelphia, I am also President of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, so, with your indulgence, I would like to split my testimony into two brief segments. First from a statewide philosophical and policy perspective, and then from the perspective of an educator on the ground who deals every day with the good and bad of our current funding for special education.

Let me start with a fundamental premise.

A special needs child is a special needs child regardless of where they go to school. One child is not worth more or less than another, nor should the scope or quality of the services that are available to one not be available to all.

At the state level, we were supportive of this legislation from the beginning because it is designed to look at the needs of the children and is blind to which district they live in or whether they go to a traditional, cyber, or brick and mortar public school. It puts the needs of the children first and any legislation which does that has our support.

Unfortunately, the current state is not consistent with my fundamental premise.

Throughout this state, some educators and parents have been alleged to be gaming the system to try to move special education students out of their school, screen them from coming in, or re-classifying the level of disability to get more money. If this is happening it is shameful, unethical and violates the spirit of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). From a charter perspective, funding and support for special education that should come from the IUs is strong in some cases and non-existent in others. Many IUs reflect the attitude of their traditional school base and view charters as an unwanted stepchild, not worthy of support – not only in special education, but in all areas. Moreover charter schools with extensive special education populations have significant transportation costs that are not unfunded by money passed through from the districts.

Another concern is that for charter schools, any major funding change executed in isolation can have disastrous results. Consider the current funding for the school where I am employed. This past year, our school served fifty-one (51) special education students. We received approximately \$630,000 in special education funding. Our school spent approximately \$653,000 on special education staffing and services. However, this does not include case management services, clinical and counseling services

provided by the school, supplies, training, adaptive programs nor administrative costs. Additionally, our school serves several students with section 504 accommodations (physical and/or mental health). We served students with suicidal ideology, homicidal ideology, gender identity issues, major depressive disorder, conduct disorder, drug and alcohol issues and trauma from various physical and emotional abuse. The majority of these children do not have IEP's, but require significant supports. An isolated change in special education funding, if a decrease, would have a huge negative impact on our school. I am uncertain as to level and quality of services that could be provided with additional funding cuts beyond what our school, like many others has sustained.

I would much rather spend my time telling you about the various children and programs in our school, as opposed to discussion fiscal issues. I would love to detail the students who participated in culinary and arts programs within our summer program. I would prefer to discuss the social, emotional and academic progress experienced by one of our students with autism who has become part of our kung fu and tai chi training. For that matter, I would enjoy telling you about the profound impact his presence has had on his classmates. However, the harsh reality is that each of these stories may take a negative twist depending upon the decisions made related to funding special education in our commonwealth.

I urge you to consider the following recommendations as part of your final report related to special education funding:

- Any special education funding education changes for charter schools (brick & mortar or cyber) should not be considered in isolation. PCPCS has encouraged a comprehensive review of charter school funding and suggests this body make a recommendation for the same, in order to truly ascertain the impact of special education funding changes on the overall financial viability of Pennsylvania's charter schools
- Any special education funding changes be done in a manner to ensure that all children with disabilities are treated equally and with respect. Funding tiers and delineations should not serve to create second or third classes of special education students depending upon their disability, district of residence or their parents decision to pursue a public charter option
- Intermediate Units should be made to provide services and access to services in a manner consistent with that provided to districts. **Please consider the concept of a statewide Intermediate Unit for Pennsylvania's brick & mortar and cyber charter schools**

In closing, I would like to thank you for your consideration of this manner that is incredibly important to the students, parents, teachers and administrators in Pennsylvania.