

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE BASIC EDUCATION FUNDING COMMISSION

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Lawrence F. Jones, Jr., M.Ed.

President, Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools

Ladies and gentlemen of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony before you today.

My name is Lawrence F. Jones, Jr. I am CEO and founding member of the Richard Allen Preparatory Charter School, a middle charter school serving approximately 510 students in grades 5 to 8 in Southwest Philadelphia. I also serve as President of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools which is the only statewide organization of charter schools advocating for choice, quality, and accountability in all forms of public education.

It is in that role as President of the statewide Coalition that I am testifying before you this morning.

Today there are more than 128,000 children in the 174 charter schools in Pennsylvania with an additional 40,000 children on waiting lists to get in. Charter schools draw from every district in the state and are the most honest manifestation of the eclectic demographics of the children in Pennsylvania - urban, rural, suburban, affluent, poverty stricken, gifted, challenged, and every conceivable nationality and native language. Every joy and challenge of public education is manifested in our public charter schools.

Originally, charter schools were intended to be laboratories for innovative ideas that could be implemented in the districts, but two things got in the way of that aspiration. First is a funding system that, from the beginning, put districts and charters in conflict over money. Second, is parents who saw charters filling a much more fundamental need to get their children better and more appropriate educational options. In other words, choice trumped innovation.

Neither of these was a problem at first, but as more parents chose the charter option and districts felt increasing financial pressures, it has evolved into a situation where districts and charters view each other as adversarial competitors rather than partners, both spending precious resources debating who gets the money rather than what is best for the children. We must replace conflict in public education with creativity, collaboration, and choice.

The fact is that charter schools are here to stay. Charter schools in Pennsylvania educate children in urban, suburban and rural areas, and serve students of varying demographics. Additionally, in some of the most challenging educational environments, charters are achieving better results with fewer taxpayer dollars. In Philadelphia, district schools spend about \$12,000 per student while the charters receive only \$10,000. Yet the average SPP score in the district schools, including magnets, is 57.3, but 64.2 in the charters. In Pittsburgh, about \$21,000 is spent on every district student while the charters receive about \$11,000. The average SPP for the Pittsburgh schools, including magnets, is 64.9 and 63.0 for the charters. But one charter serves only truancy and court adjudicated children from the Pittsburgh School District. If that score is removed from the charters, the charter SPP average climbs to 67.7.

The point is that good charter schools are a different model for public education that is already delivering effective education to our children for less money.

Charters are a fundamental element of public education and are, in fact, already part of the solution.

Please consider that most of us in this room were educated in a manner similar to our parents and their parents. Teacher lectures, textbook assignments, quizzes and tests were familiar school experiences. Today, our students are being educated in a world of blogs, social media and ever-changing instructional delivery systems. Unfortunately, as the educational landscape has changed and evolved, public education funding in Pennsylvania has failed keep up and is not adequately providing equitable resources for a 21st century educational system.

To look at this issue in an overly simplistic manner, we need to consider what constitutes a basic education, in today's world. Books, paper, writing instruments, office supplies, cleaning materials and a safe structure are reasonable expectations. Access to technology, air conditioning, health/physical education equipment and nursing services may also be on the short list.

Unfortunately, in Pennsylvania, some of the things we would consider basic components of education are missing or considered luxuries for some children. Our funding methodology is woefully inequitable and in many cases ineffective. In short, it's broken.

There are children attending schools where funding for basic staffing and supplies are in question, while a few short miles away there are children in schools where the visiting football teams locker room rivals that of a professional team. For charter schools, this same inequity exists and is exacerbated by a reduced per

pupil allotment, uncertain year to year funding based on the PDE-363, mid year funding reductions and a litany of actual and threatened cuts approved at the state and local level (PSERS, FICA, unilateral enrollment caps). While the inequity in educational funding is at crisis levels, for charters schools the flawed funding formula seems to be problematic only because of harm believed to be caused to traditional districts. My concern is not based in the devaluation of charter schools, but more so in the inequitable treatment and devaluation of children attending all public schools.

Pennsylvania's flawed funding formula disproportionately negatively impacts children who are most vulnerable and in need of resources. Inadequately funded schools, whether district or charter become ill equipped to help children escape cycles of generational poverty and futures with limited potential.

This Commission has the ability to make a recommendation that could change this paradigm.

Allow me to provide my perspective on a simple, but difficult solution.

Rather than talking about how to fund school districts and charter schools, we simply need to figure out how to fund each child.

Treat **every** child in this state the **fairly** regardless of the type of public education delivery system they have chosen.

This means a per student allocation weighted by individual considerations, such as English language learners, poverty, homelessness, and other factors which necessitate additional resources to help those children succeed.

A fundamental question you must address is: Are taxpayers paying their tax dollars to educate children or to support a specific system?

While adequate and fair funding is necessary, it is only one aspect of effective education.

So long as we as educators and legislators investigate the wrong problems, ask the wrong questions, and focus on the symptoms rather than the causes, we will never get the right solution.

So far, we, are doing all of the wrong things. It's time for this conflict over money between districts and charters to stop so that we can all focus on educating our children.

It's time for all of us to set aside our entrenched self-interests and place the best interests of our children at the apex of our priorities. Until, and unless, we do so, the promise of our children will never be fulfilled and they will fail because we have failed.