

Testimony before the Special Education Funding Formula Commission

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Good morning. My name is Kevin Corcoran and I am privileged to serve as the Assistant Head of School at the Agora Cyber Charter School. I have worked at Agora for the past seven years, first as the school's Director of Finance and Operations and for the past 4 years as the Assistant Head of School. I have also been fortunate to serve as an officer in the United States military for the past 15 years and currently serve as the Commanding Officer of a joint reserve unit stationed near Harrisburg.

Background on Agora Cyber Charter School

Agora is a wonderfully diverse school that truly looks like Pennsylvania. We have students from urban areas, students from rural areas, students from suburban areas – and all points in between. Our current enrollment is approximately 10,000 students drawn from every county and 495 individual school districts across the Commonwealth. Approximately 70% of our students come are of Free or Reduced Lunch status, and a similar number hail from school districts that did not meet AYP in recent years.

23% of our student population, totaling more than 2000 individual students, have an Individualized Education Plan or IEP. Of these students, 93% - or roughly 13 of 14 – enrolled at our school based on identification by and with IEPs from their school district of residence. Only 7% of these students – 1 out of 14 -have been designated as Special Education status while enrolled at Agora. Similarly, we as a team of educators are thrilled that Special Education students graduate – 128 of them last year – with a High School diploma or are transitioned from their IEPs to full General Education status each year.

Confirming Equivalence of Exceptionalities and Costs to Serve and Correcting Earlier Testimony

When I initially started at Agora I served in the capacity that many schools refer to as Business Manager and am comfortable in providing analysis of and feedback on recent testimonies

delivered by representatives from other charter schools and also the School Business Officials group. Before stating my main points and providing feedback on various proposed changes to the Special Education funding formula, I want to affirm and validate some key points made by Dr Flurie of Connections Academy, in which he stated that cyber charter schools have costs that are different but not less than traditional schools. He also cited the additional, in some cases unfunded costs that cyber charters face in relation to traditional school districts in serving both General Ed and Special Ed students, including statewide assessments and travel, required provision of computers, related technical support services and internet reimbursement to families, alternative assessments and transportation costs for special education students. For the most recent school year, our school spent a total of \$15 million on these various categories in total.

In addition to the overall spending on Special Education students and related services, I can personally vouch for the common presence of high-need, high cost-to-serve cases that counterbalance more common cases in which student needs and exceptionalities do not match the level of reimbursement rates from districts. It is absolutely true that many of our students do not require the full current reimbursement level in order to serve them and their IEP goals effectively; however, it is equally true that the presence of high-cost cases can pose extreme challenges, especially in smaller schools. At our school last year, we served 16 students for whom the cost to provide Special Education supports and services exceeded \$50K each; of these, 5 exceeded \$100K in costs and 3 exceeded \$125K in costs. At an average Special Education funding level under \$11,000, you can imagine the strain these cases can place on a school's budget.

I also want to correct – at least in the case of our school – some inaccurate information presented during testimony earlier this month. The average reimbursement our school received for Special Education funding for the most recent school year was approximately \$10,600, which is nearly 40% lower than was implied or stated in the testimony by the School Business Officials organization. It was additionally implied or stated that charter schools may be using the identification of students as Special Education status to inflate funding levels. Today I'm pleased to provide the fact that, at least in the case of our school and as I mentioned in my opening comments, 93% of our Special Education students ARRIVED TO our school with IEPs from their school district of residence.

It is no secret that certain stakeholders would love to use this process to steer funding away from charter school students and back to the coffers of districts that no longer serve these students. Because we are a new model and relatively small, perhaps our schools and others like it are an easy political target. Given that there are no inherent differences between the IEP needs of and cost to serve Special Education students in a traditional school district versus a

charter school versus a cyber charter school, I find it concerning that the focus of some has been on attempting to discredit these students needs and equal costs, as opposed to, say, the fact that – from a taxpayer perspective – districts who are no longer educating or providing services to students only pass on 70-80% of the funds earmarked to serve that student and keep up to 30% for themselves for students they no longer educate.

A Tiered-Formula Approach Can Work, While Actual Cost Would Be Ideal Public Policy

But that discussion takes us further down a General Education funding path, which I know is not the focus of today’s hearing. With respect to proposals for changes to Special Education funding, including the “actual cost approach” or “three-tiered formula”, there are certainly strengths and risks to each – and it would be false for me to say that one method is clearly more effective or better public policy, when factoring in the implementation challenges, for example, of an Actual Cost approach in which 16 cyber charter schools across the state would be required to reconcile with 500 individual school districts for a possible total of 8000 individual actions. But conceptually either a Tiered Approach or Actual Cost Model seem viable and might potentially improve on the current approach – but the devil will be in the details of the final language and the implementation of any changes.

Conclusion

Regardless of which option or any combination of options is selected, I would urge the members of this committee to be mindful of these truths:

First, the exceptionalities, needs and costs to serve a Special Education student vary by each child – but not by whether they attend a traditional brick and mortar, charter or cyber charter school; any attempts to claim as such fail any test of logic or review of aggregate student IEPs and should be seen for what they are: a naked attempt to divert taxpayer money away from the charter and cyber charter schools that are actually serving these students and back to the coffers of traditional districts that – I say again – are no longer educating these students.

Second, the awesome power of school choice to improve student outcomes and school accountability – and Pennsylvania’s national position of leadership in these areas – will be undermined and diminished by any change that further erodes the notion that Special Education students in charter schools’ education is somehow less valuable or their needs less real than when those same students sat in traditional brick and mortar buildings. Charter schools already receive less funding to pay for the same students, same need and same services; while we can debate changes to improve the effectiveness of the current funding formula, any changes should apply to all types of schools equally and the same.

Third, nearly 1 in 4 of the students at our school are Special Education students and came to us designated as such. The parents and families of these students chose charter schools not because we are offering fancy facilities or expensive extracurricular programs, but rather because something in their home district was not meeting their expectations as parents or the educational needs of their children, and because – and here’s the beauty of democracy and choice, as any of our families can vote with their feet to dis-enroll from our school on any given day – because they believe in the teachers and programs and services that we provide them. And because we take very seriously our charge to deliver the best education and level of service humanly possible.

On behalf of our Board of Trustees, our roughly 700 educators and professional staff, and especially on behalf of the 2000 plus Special Education students who attend Agora and their families, I thank the Committee for your work on this important topic, for the opportunity to speak today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have – either now or through subsequent research and follow-up.

Appendix – Agora Cyber Charter School: Demographics and Key Facts

Enrollment (as of Sep 2013):	9845
Special Education students as % of total Student Body:	23%
% of Students Qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch:	70%
Average Per Pupil Funding/Reimbursement from School Districts (Gen Ed):	\$8900
Average Per Pupil Funding/Reimbursement from School Districts (Special Ed):	\$10,600
# of School Districts represented in Student Body:	495
Total # Teachers and Professional Staff:	715
Total # Special Education Teachers and Support Staff:	144

Top 10 Student Cases – Highest Cost to Serve

Cost to Serve	Services Required
\$151,999.64	Personal Care Asst, Behavioral Program, Speech & Physical Therapy
\$142,844.54	Speech, Language, Physical Therapy; BCBA & PCA; Linda Mood Bell
\$138,250.54	Personal Care Asst, Behavioral Specialist, Speech, Physical Therapy
\$117,996.00	Behavior Interventionist, Speech, Language & Physical Therapy; Tutor
\$108,189.22	Communication Facilitator; Tutor; Speech, Language & Physical Ther
\$91,849.24	Personal Care Asst; Behavioral Specialist; Speech, Language & Phys
\$85,134.00	Personal Care Asst; Behavioral Specialist; Speech, Language & Phys
\$72,815.28	Personal Care Asst; Vision Therapy; Speech, Language & Phys
\$68,414.00	Private Academy tuition; Transportation
\$55,077.42	Private School tuition; Transportation