

PA Senate Education Committee
Public Hearing: Continuity of Education Programs Offered by Public Schools During COVID-19
May 11, 2020

Testimony of Ana Meyers
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Good Morning Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman, and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Ana Meyers, I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS). PCPCS is the voice of charter schools in the state, representing both brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools. We advocate for the rights of students, charter operators, educators, and parents. Currently, there are approximately 143,000 students in brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools across Pennsylvania.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown the need for all of us to adapt to changes in many aspects of our lives quickly. Education is one the sectors that has experienced these drastic changes. Pennsylvania's public charter schools have always provided an invaluable option for students whose educational, emotional or safety needs were unable to be met by their assigned school district. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the value and importance of public charter schools even more.

For most schools, the COVID-19 crisis has required a shift from classroom teaching to online instruction. Pennsylvania's public charter schools, both cyber and brick-and-mortar, are doing their part to ensure students receive the instruction they need. As public school officials who have an obligation to ensure our children are learning, as best they can during this crisis, charter leaders and teachers immediately went to work and identified solutions to give students the learning opportunities they needed.

Public charter school teachers work hard, with less resources than school districts, to ensure each student, whether they have special needs or need an accelerated path, receives an education that works for them. Across Pennsylvania, these teachers are doing everything they can to support their students and ensure they are learning during this difficult period. Public charter school teachers are calling students on a regular basis and communicating with parents. They are focused on their students' education as well as their emotional well-being.

PCPCS has many examples of what public charter schools have done throughout the state during this pandemic and I will highlight a few throughout this testimony.

Pennsylvania's public cyber charter schools have more than 20 years of experience in educating students online and they currently educate more than 37,000 students with a wide range of educational needs in every county. They understand the logistical and financial challenges of teaching a large number of students online, and have the experience and tools to teach students from all backgrounds and economic statuses. Their knowledge is invaluable for a school struggling with online instruction especially during the COVID-19 health situation, and they have offered multiple times to share this knowledge with their colleagues. This offer includes professional development and consultation to any public school entity.

As public cyber charter schools can attest to, implementing a full scale cyber education model requires extensive planning and preparation regardless of the length of time it may be offered. In addition, providing a high-quality program with a continuation of supports comes with real and meaningful challenges including both logistic and financial considerations. With that in mind, [public cyber charter schools sent a letter to the Department of Education](#), prior to the school closures, offering guidance and assistance to any brick-and-mortar school, public or private, as it adapted its traditional curriculum to virtual learning for its students. This offer has also been [made multiple times](#) on our social media channels to school districts, brick-and-mortar charter schools and private schools directly.

As a result, recently, school counselors from PA Distance Learning Charter School held a teleconference with their colleagues from across Pennsylvania to discuss distance school counseling. They shared best practices, strategies and tools with their colleagues. For many counselors at brick-and-mortar schools, meeting students online rather than face-to-face is a new experience. Public cyber charter schools have also held webinars for teachers on using virtual tools for instruction. PCPCS has been able to successfully connect public cyber charter schools with several brick-and-mortar schools during this pandemic, including schools in Maryland, a state where public cyber charter schools do not exist yet.

Given the nature their educational model, PA's 14 public cyber charter schools were immediately able to offer a high-quality continuity of education consistent with the expectations of their students and families. For the public cyber charter school students in Pennsylvania, very little has changed as a result of the Governor's school closure announcement on March 13th.

Here are just a few examples of what public cyber charter schools are currently doing to provide continuity of education in Pennsylvania:

- At the time of the closure, [PA Cyber Charter School](#) was currently serving over 2,600 students with special needs. PA Cyber has been able to implement plans to continue to remain in compliance of each special education student's IEP by providing a continuum of special education services and programming, related services, and other supplemental programs and services. They are continuing to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals providing education, specialized instruction, and related services. All special education teachers are providing distance instruction virtually through PA Cyber's online learning platform, recorded videos, and/or other

modes to students with special needs, as well as resource room opportunities in order to meet the specific needs of all students. Current placements in the general classroom include: regular education classroom (least restrictive); co-taught classroom with supplementary instruction and services; regular or co-taught classroom with resource room (academics); and regular or co-taught classroom with resource room (social skills/behavior). Current placements in the separate classroom include learning support, life skills support and autism support. Students with special needs continue to have the opportunity to engage in online tutoring, teacher office hours, as well as supplemental programs and services that are provided at special education department and school-wide levels. The special education department continues to provide related services to all students. Some students were previously receiving these services in a face-to-face environment. During the week of March 16, these face-to-face services were all migrated to virtual/teletherapy services. All students either had or were provided with the appropriate technology in order to implement these services. Services that are currently being provided virtually include: occupational therapy; speech and language therapy; psychological service; tutoring; social skills; counseling; transition/vocational services; and behavior services. PA Cyber has continued to meet all federal and state mandated special education timelines and has continued to follow all typical practices and processes in order to ensure parents and/or guardians are active participants in IEP meetings and have the opportunity to participate meaningfully.

- [PA Virtual Charter School](#), which supports approximately 2,300 students across Pennsylvania, continued to provide a continuity of education including consistent special education supports just as they had prior to March 13th. In anticipation of the COVID-19 health crisis and prior to the Governor's order to close schools, PA Virtual's special education staff and service providers partnered with parents and prepared to offer in-person therapies through an online model. This enabled PA Virtual to have a seamless transition when the Governor's order took effect. Of the 81 students who received in-person services that needed to be switched to online, only 3 parents chose to not have the services provided online or based on the service, it could not be provided online. Those services will be rescheduled when the Governor's order is lifted. For students whose families chose to enroll with PA Virtual after March 13th, all of their services are provided online, consistent with their Individualized Education Plans.
- In addition, the Directors of Special Education of the cyber charter schools meet weekly via Zoom to discuss ongoing concerns related to the COVID-19 health crisis and to determine best practices for supporting their special education students. Further, a Special Education Advisor with the PA Department of Education frequently attends those Zoom meetings to provide guidance and support.
- At [PA Distance Learning Charter School](#), early internet reimbursements have been issued to families to ensure all students remain connected despite any financial hardships as a result of the pandemic.

Throughout the current health crisis, Pennsylvania's public cyber charter schools continue to lead the way in providing a consistent and high-quality continuity of education, while simultaneously

providing support and guidance to brick-and-mortar schools throughout the country eager to adopt the cyber education model. The pandemic has clearly shown there is a big difference between offering a comprehensive, online education program for thousands of students and offering a limited, blended learning program for a select few.

Just like school districts, brick-and-mortar public charter schools have had to transform their classrooms to accommodate virtual learning in response to the pandemic. Here are a few examples of what brick-and-mortar public charter schools have done to quickly adapt to the demands placed on them by the pandemic:

- In Philadelphia, the majority of brick-and-mortar charter schools are in underserved areas and have become an integral part of their communities. Their students and families rely on their schools and teachers for much more than education. The schools have partnered with the Mayor's Office and the School District to serve as food distribution sites, serving more than 400,000 meals. They too have fought the digital divide experienced by disadvantaged students and have supplied more than 15,000 computers to their students.
 - In the months since schools closed, [Mastery Charter School Network](#) distributed over 500,000 meals in under 30 days and has provided thousands of families with a place to go for meals, information and reassurance. A tractor trailer of printed learning materials was sent to all 14,000 students. All students are contacted by their teachers, social workers and other school leaders on a weekly basis. Mastery worked with Comcast and other Philadelphia public charter schools to make sure that all families could access free internet through the end of the school year. Mastery also created a 10,000 laptop lending library to provide every student in grades 3-12 with a device for home use. Mastery has moved to an online academic model similar to regular school where students are getting graded.
 - [Freire Charter School](#) purchased and shipped laptops to all of their 2,000 students in the past month, and contracted and paid for internet service for their families that needed it. They successfully moved their mental health program and one-on-one program online. As of May 5, Freire was able to return to full instruction via distance learning. Prior to that, they were working with their students to end the third quarter allowing them to make up any of their work. Freire has created an online after school program that is quite robust as well!
- In Pittsburgh, when [Propel Schools](#) received the news that school buildings would be closed due to COVID-19, they immediately asked themselves “What is most important and immediate for our scholars right now?” The answer was that they wanted to be sure that their scholars and their families had their intersectional needs met, that their scholars knew that Propel cared about them, and was ready to support them and that Propel kept the sense of continuity and community that we all value. Although Propel, like many other schools, encountered logistical challenges, they used them as an opportunity to think outside the box, grow their creativity and model courage, care and community for their scholars. The Propel team hit the ground running:
 - Propel immediately partnered with a local food bank organization to provide grab-and-go lunches for their scholars.

- Their talented academic team immediately mobilized to create a website with a virtual backpack of activities for all grade levels to use while their Google Classrooms were being carefully built.
 - They used their unique framework of professional development to train educators to successfully move to a virtual platform of learning.
 - The wellness team reached out individually to all families to check in with them and ascertain if they could be of assistance. Their Wellness Center team collaborated with community providers to keep their free store running, and also to provide fresh produce and other fresh products to the school families and community members.
 - The technology team immediately began gathering technology from their school buildings and preparing them for their scholars' home use. Propel has sourced distributed 2,500 laptops.
 - The school teams assured authentic connections via new and engaging virtual "School and Community Council" meetings as well as a parents only virtual coffee hour for conversation and community.
- [Penn Hills Charter School of Entrepreneurship](#), also located in the Pittsburgh region, began planning for the pandemic when they received notice of the coronavirus on February 5 from the Department of Health. Their staff and families have embraced the challenge and rose to the occasion. By February 28, they had gathered enough information, implemented a pandemic illness policy, temporary telework policy, sent correspondence to their families and created a coronavirus resource webpage. Through this page, they were sending letters home with updates and next steps. The staff immersed themselves in meetings and dialogue surrounding worse case scenarios and began to plan for the future (now referred to as the NEW NORMAL). Fortunately, back in 2016, Penn Hills Charter implemented a 1-to-1 technology initiative which gave them the ability to supply every student with a Chromebook. All staff engaged in developing a student contact log (which included detailed information regarding students in need - homeless, foster care, families living in poverty - IEP, students who normally struggled with attendance and submitting assignments) to create teams who were responsible for contacting EVERY SINGLE FAMILY before March 18 when their alternative instruction began. Every week, staff meet virtually to review the notes in the log to ensure all students and families are engaged.
 - [Bear Creek Community Charter School](#), located in Wilkes-Barre, anticipated potential school closures prior to Governor Wolf's order, so they quickly developed a one-week contingency plan for the week of March 16-20 to buy them some time. They conducted a parent technology survey two weeks prior, so they knew most of the students who were going to have challenges accessing technology at home. On the last day of school, they had students take iPads home as well as their interactive notebooks for Math and ELA, along with a summary sheet for each student identifying the logins and passwords for their online textbooks. They implemented review and enrichment that first week, which allowed them time to put in a structured plan for teachers and students going forward. Their formal plan started March 23rd, with each classroom teacher conducting an online lesson via Zoom or Goggle Classroom (grade dependent) on Mondays. Teachers

recorded the lessons and added them to their teacher webpages for parents and students to review. Students were assigned work for the remainder of the week, using their interactive notebooks, iReady software, or their online textbooks. Teachers held “office hours” on Fridays to collect work and answer questions from students and parents. They worked with Service Electric Cable, a local cable provider, to provide parents with free internet through June 30th and they continue to communicate formally, school-wide with parents every other week via a hard-copy letter via mail, MailChimp, website and Facebook. This is in addition to the weekly office hours for each teacher. The speech, OT and PT staff have been conducting “tele-therapy” sessions with specific students. They have been able to conduct all their IEP meetings via Zoom with formal paperwork via mail, and their counselor and psychologist are holding sessions via telephone or Zoom. Bear Creek’s school nurse has a roster of 24 kids she calls weekly just to check in. Finally, they have a very active Facebook page. The “specialist teachers” post optional activities weekly, and the paraprofessionals have been hosting daily activities to keep kids engaged, like guest readers, spirit days, etc.

- In Altoona, [HOPE for Hyndman Charter School](#), in an effort to make sure seniors don't miss out on all the things leading up to graduation, delivered their senior banquet to them. They called it a “Banquet In A Box” and the meal included enough food for them to enjoy with their families. They are also continuing to serve “to go” meals to students in the area, free of charge. The meals are served on Mondays and each student, 18 and under, receives five breakfast items, three hot lunches and two bagged lunches. This past week, they served 130 students for a total of 1,300 meals. They also handed out snack bags and family bags containing items like eggs, watermelons, blackberries and coleslaw.

Looking into the upcoming school year, it is all going to come down to what guidelines Governor Wolf and the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) issue. However, in order to be as prepared as possible, public charter schools across the state are already preparing in the event distance learning is required again this Fall with adjusted schedules or staggered learning environments. Public cyber charter schools will continue to operate almost as normally with the exceptions of in-person activities. Public cyber charter schools will also have the capacity for more students if necessary.

If schools do reopen in the Fall, they might look very different from before, as officials consider imposing safeguards, such as requiring face masks. We are trying to do the best we can to map out potential scenarios that might develop and charter schools will be ready for anything. We do hope that guidance comes from PDE sooner rather than later so that we can be as prepared as possible on our end. Anything that the General Assembly can do to encourage Governor Wolf and PDE to communicate their plan for schools as soon as possible would be ideal.

Though COVID-19 has been the priority of the General Assembly over the past few months, we know that discussions around the 2020-21 budget will begin soon. As you discuss future public education funding, we ask that you consider the value offered by public charter schools and why thousands of families in Pennsylvania chose a public charter school as the best educational opportunity for their children. Though Act 13 of 2020 froze funding levels for all schools, which

unfortunately means that charter schools have not been receiving tuition reimbursement for the new students they have been educating since March 13, we understood that you took this action to create financial stability during this crisis. Unfortunately, the Wolf Administration changed the rules and left Pennsylvania's public charter schools in a difficult and uncertain position. Shortly after Act 13 became law, Secretary Rivera posted new guidance on the PDE's website **requiring** all schools to enroll students regardless of their ability to financially provide for their education. While this most likely has not impacted school districts (because very few families are moving at this time), it puts Pennsylvania's public charter schools, both brick-and-mortar and cyber, in a bind as they have seen a surge in enrollment during the closure. We do not believe that requiring schools to educate students without the resources to pay for technology, curriculum materials, and funding to compensate educators was the intention of the General Assembly and we ask that going into the Fall this issue is addressed.

While the relationship between school districts and public charter schools has been contentious at times, the public charter school community wants to put politics aside and work with our counterparts to do what's best for students in Pennsylvania. Everyone needs to do their part to get through the current COVID-19 threat, and Pennsylvania's public charter schools want to be part of that solution.

PA's public charter schools will continue to do their part to identify solutions and the 143,000 students they serve will continue to be educated by the schools they have chosen to attend.

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the committee for holding this hearing today. I urge all legislators to seek out public charter school students and families in their districts, to hear their stories, and empower parents to make the best decisions for their children.

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