



SPECTRUM CHARTER SCHOOL, INC.

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Testimony of Gail Yamnitzky, CEO of Spectrum Charter School

Public Hearing on Pennsylvania Safely Reopening Schools Due to COVID-19

House Education Committee

February 23, 2021

Good morning. I'd like to begin by thanking the House Education Committee and its leadership for providing me the opportunity to share the experiences of the students and staff of Spectrum Charter School as we have navigated through these challenging and historical days. As we are nearing the one year anniversary of the initial close of schools in the state of Pennsylvania, it is very difficult to imagine a time when mask wearing, hand-washing and social distancing was not a part of our everyday lives.

I am Dr. Gail Yamnitzky, CEO and Principal of Spectrum Charter School. I believe that I bring a unique perspective to this hearing as a 27-year veteran of education. One year ago, I took over the leadership of Spectrum Charter School, after spending the first 26 years of my career as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent in a school district. I believe that I have a strong understanding of what both school districts and public charter schools face, and recognize and acknowledge the value of both.

A little less than one year ago, the COVID-19 pandemic changed all of our lives. In the educational world, it forced educators, parents and students to reimagine schools and schooling – a task that evolved into a paradigm shift in education that was totally unexpected.

I offer the following information about our school and our very unique students as a precursor to helping the House Education Committee develop a clear and robust picture of our evolution. Spectrum was established as a brick-and-mortar, fairly traditional public school and has transitioned into a highly specialized hybrid learning system grounded in best practices in the use of educational technology, 21st Century learning skills and effective remote instruction – skills that will all be easily transferable when “life returns to normal”.



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Spectrum Charter School is a very small, very unique school about 10 miles east of Pittsburgh. We have been in existence for more than 20 years. We currently educate 33 students, and have a staff of 15. By virtue of our charter agreement, our enrollment is limited to 13- to 21-year-old students who have been diagnosed with one of the 13 disability categories outlined by IDEA. The majority of our students are on the autism spectrum however, we also have students diagnosed with a specific learning disability, intellectual disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder and vision impairment. While we offer a traditional set of high school course offerings, we are more focused on providing a personalized learning environment to our students. Lastly, we have an expansive Transition Program to prepare our students for life after high school. This program includes job shadowing, job mentoring, volunteering in the community, job coaching, and regular practice in life skills activities. This personalized learning program is grounded in several key tenets:

- Students on the autism spectrum, or those with learning disabilities, have a wide range of needs, abilities and talents.
- A one-size-fits-all approach will not serve to prepare our students to be independent and valuable contributing members of our society.
- Our educational programming must go well beyond just academic learning and must meet our students' social, behavioral and emotional needs.
- Our students experience a wide variety of barriers to their learning that must be overcome.
- Our students must master the 21st Century learning skills of creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and problem-solving.
- We have a significant and important responsibility to transition our students effectively from high school to post-high school life.

In addition to building an educational program around these tenets, Spectrum Charter School's staff is highly trained in the unique qualities and characteristics of students with learning disabilities, and those on the autism spectrum. As such, those qualities and characteristics of our students require the teachers and support staff to make significant accommodations to a traditional classroom. It is not uncommon for students with autism or a learning disability to demonstrate some of the following behaviors:



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- A very strong reliance on a consistent schedule
- A very strong dislike for change
- A strong need for multiple breaks during classes
- Sensitivities to sound, light and touch
- An avoidance of social interactions
- Impaired communication
- Repetitive behavior
- Slow or delayed conceptual understanding

The behaviors noted above require the staff of Spectrum Charter School to modify and adapt the curriculum, instruction, assessments and school environment to remove the barriers to learning that these behaviors create.

On March 13, 2020 when Governor Wolf closed schools, my staff, students and parents understood that we had a responsibility to continue an exemplary educational program in a virtual setting that met the needs of our students as noted above. However, we had no real understanding of the impact this would have on our students' learning and growth. While we recognized and acknowledged that school closure would place a unique burden on our students, we had no clear understanding of the depth of that burden, or the magnitude of the unintended consequences that would result. We also could not have predicted the unplanned strain on our very limited budget. What we did know was that we would continue to provide our students with the very best education we could.

During the first of two moves from in-person to remote learning, my staff and I hastily met to outline our approach and it was decided that all instruction had to be synchronous (or in real time) due to the level of support our students needed. Asynchronous learning (a process whereby teachers post pre-recorded lessons for later access by students) would have been easier, but it was impossible for many of our students due to the level of independence it requires. Teachers quickly made Google classrooms and learned how to utilize Zoom. Each teacher met with each student individually to review and practice how to navigate both. This was a challenge for many of our students as it required either multi-tasking or a multi-step process – both of



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which are very difficult for students with a slow or delayed ability to understand some concepts. Oftentimes it took multiple phone meetings, and the assistance of paraprofessionals and parents just to prepare our students to learn.

At this time, the school purchased Chromebooks for all students and laptops for all teachers at a significant cost to us. Through much practice and repetition, and a modified curriculum, our teachers provided synchronous learning sessions daily through the end of the 2019-2020 school year. In addition, our Transition Program was suspended since we could not take our students out into the community to practice the many skills necessary to prepare for post-graduation work, volunteering or schooling. However, via Zoom, we were able to create opportunities for our students to meet and interview individuals whose jobs were of interest to our students. Our students also took virtual tours of job sites of interest.

As it was vitally important to ensure that our students made progress toward their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and continued to receive a free and public education (FAPE), we used our support staff of paraprofessionals to meet with students regularly in Zoom “breakout rooms” to employ some of the specially designed instruction our students needed as outlined in their IEPs. This specially designed instruction included, but was not limited to: one-on-one review of skills and concepts taught during daily lessons; extra practice of recently taught skills; clarification and in-depth explanations of lesson directions; guided and close reading; and modifications or accommodations to required tasks and projects. In addition to paraprofessional support, all related services were moved to a remote platform so our students continued to receive vision support, occupational and physical therapy, and speech and language support.

Many of our students experience social and behavioral challenges. In an effort to meet these needs, our teachers reviewed every student’s social or behavioral IEP goals and worked with the IEP teams to revise them so that they could be worked on in a remote setting. Lastly, teachers developed procedures to assess students one-on-one so that we could closely monitor their progress. Each of these modifications, to ensure FAPE, required teachers to conduct research in best practices, and attend webinars and conferences specifically designed for students with



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special needs. It was often said that a teacher’s day in a remote setting was far longer than a “regular” school day.

The summer of 2020 posed another unique challenge for myself and my staff. We provide an “Extended School Year” (ESY) program to any student who risks regression of academic progress or lack of retention of skills learned. We redesigned our ESY program to follow the state mandate of no on-site learning during the summer months. We, again, developed Google classrooms and increased the number of support staff hired for the summer. Students were provided with individualized lessons in math, reading and/or writing based on their IEP goals. In addition, through some research, our teachers were able to find virtual field trips and Zoom social gatherings to enhance our students’ ESY experiences.

Following the completion of our ESY program, the PA Department of Education tasked each school or district to develop a plan for a possible return to in-person learning. As you know, we were required to develop and submit a “Health and Safety Plan” outlining the kinds of instruction that would be offered in the 2020-2021 school year.

A committee of teachers, administrators, board members and parents was brought together many times over the summer months to conduct research into best practices for mitigating the COVID-19 virus, as well as best practices in meeting the needs of our special population. It was agreed that offering a hybrid model of instruction provided a valuable choice for our families, and acknowledged the importance of in-person instruction for students with special needs.

This committee developed a return-to-in-person instructional model following the CDC’s and the PA Department of Health’s guidelines for the strictest mitigation efforts. These efforts included: daily temperature checks; mask wearing; frequent hand-washing; 6-foot social distancing; the creation of small learning pods; no large gatherings of students or staff; the use of plexiglass shields; quarantining; the hiring of a full-time Certified School Nurse; and a deep cleaning of our building at regular intervals. It was also decided that those students who opted for remote learning would continue to receive synchronous instruction by their teachers alongside their peers.



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Having purchased all of the necessary tools and supplies to implement these mitigation efforts with our CARES Act funding, students, staff and families were brought together remotely prior to the opening of school for several trainings in preparation for our return to in-person learning in the 2020-2021 school year. Teachers prepared for this new instructional model by spending their summer in professional development to expand their knowledge and understanding of the tools and pedagogy that would best meet the needs of their students. Teachers earned their “Google Educator” certification and became familiar with Kahoot, Nearpod, Quizlet, Quizzes, TeacherMade, Luminosity, Discovery Education, PBS Learning and much more.

Our implementation of a hybrid learning model was very successful as a result of the hard work of the staff. Parents and students expressed their confidence in the plan and their appreciation for the opportunity to have a choice. The greatest challenges we faced in those first several weeks of school were helping our students understand the importance of wearing masks all day, washing their hands regularly and maintaining a safe distance away from classmates and staff. Teachers developed hand signals, chants and signs as reminders to add a little humor to this challenging new way of attending school.

We were extremely pleased that not one student or staff member contracted the COVID-19 virus as a result of our opening school. In November 2020, Allegheny County moved into the red phase and had a “substantial transmission rate”, that coupled with the impending holidays (Thanksgiving and Christmas), our Board of Trustees decided to move all of our students and staff to remote learning out of an abundance of caution.

Spectrum Charter School remains 100 percent virtual at this time, offering synchronous learning to all of our students. However, many parents have expressed a desire for their children to return to in-person instruction. As such, the Board of Trustees has agreed to revisit a return to a hybrid model in the very near future.

I am extremely confident that my staff has gone above and beyond meeting the needs of all of our students. This may well have been one of the greatest challenges they have faced, and will face, in their careers. They have demonstrated a willingness to learn many new tools and



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techniques, rethink how they have always done things, problem-solve and approach their work with creativity and passion, and consistently put the needs of our unique learners first.

However, this historical pandemic has wrought some unintended consequences – both positive and negative. This has put an unimaginable strain on our budget. But, we were very fortunate to receive the federal stimulus money to help offset these costs, and we genuinely thank the General Assembly for keeping all public schools fully-funded for the 2020-2021 school year. I respectfully ask that lawmakers seriously consider fully-funding charter schools in the upcoming budget. Governor Wolf’s budget cuts will have a devastating effect on every student at Spectrum Charter School.

Our students’ patience with virtual learning and all of the challenges it poses for them has created attendance issues for a small number of our students. We have had to implement some creative strategies to keep them attending school and engaged. One might spot a teacher on Zoom doing a literal song and dance or using wacky filters to light a spark in some of her students. We have also put into place some additional supports for students who have heightened anxiety as a result of their disability.

One of the most unexpected unintended consequences of virtual learning is our parents’ admission that their relationship with their child has been negatively impacted. Some have shared that they don’t want to be their child’s teacher or have the heightened burden of having to be a “task-master”, and they don’t want to spend so much of their time together focusing on schooling. One parent shared, “I just want to be his mom. I want to go back to the time where our home was a place of fun and laughter”.

Fortunately, many unintended consequences have been positive. My teachers have embraced this paradigm shift from traditional schooling to a more 21st Century approach. They have learned and used the 21st Century learning skills of collaboration, creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking. I have every confidence that these strategies will continue to be used and be passed on to our students.



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Teachers have become enormous learners – learning more as a result of this pandemic than ever before, relying very heavily on the educational technology that has been available to them for many years. Teachers have found these instructional tools to be effective and engaging for their students. These will continue to be integrated into their daily practice.

Lastly, I believe that we have learned an invaluable lesson about the abilities of our students. We have expected more from them. We have challenged them to be more independent and take more control over their own learning. We have exposed them to new ideas, tools and skills. **And, because of the willingness of the staff to go above and beyond to assist our students, we have seen our students experience great successes.** While these successes may not necessarily be able to be measured by a test or quiz, one only needs to see the 8-10 faces of our kids as they log on to Zoom at exactly 8:50 a.m., perhaps a little groggy, but ready to start their school day, even though mom and dad have gone to off work. These students have become a little more independent, a little more in charge of their learning, and a little more focused on school. Most importantly, they have reminded us all of the importance of seeing their “abilities” instead of their “disabilities”.

In closing, I want to thank you for this opportunity to share our story with you. We know that there will be long-lasting and far-reaching effects of this pandemic on our educational system. I was very proud that the U.S. Department recognized our hard-work and effort to offer in-person learning to our students, and I remain confident that the lessons learned over the past year will serve educators well as they navigate this paradigm shift in schools. We’re very proud of the work that we do, and will remain committed to providing our “differently abled” students with an exemplary education.