



House Education Committee  
February 23, 2021

Testimony of Jane Swan, CEO  
Reach Cyber Charter School

Good morning, Chairman Sonney, Chairman Longiette, and Honorable Members of the House Education Committee.

I am Jane Swan, CEO, for Reach Cyber Charter School. Thank you for the opportunity to share how our school and our students have responded to the new challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an amazing day for me. My daughter Rebecca, my inspiration for all of the work I do, was born on this day quite a few years ago, in the middle of a snowstorm! I celebrate her today and all of our families across Pennsylvania who came to Reach for unique reasons and to help them on their educational journey.

Five years ago, in August 2016, Reach opened our doors with 16 staff members and 463 students with a mission to help each student maximize his or her potential. Our goal is to meet the highest performance standards through a uniquely individualized learning program, through flexible pacing and 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning including STEM opportunities. In June 2020, Reach completed our fourth year with nearly 300 staff members and 3,885 students. Due to the popularity of public cyber charter schools and parent demand for robust, comprehensive virtual education, today Reach is educating 8,797 students across the Commonwealth and has 600 staff members to serve our influx in students.

The 2020-2021 school year has been a year of recruiting, hiring and rebuilding our school to support the families who have become part of the Reach community. COVID-19 has undoubtedly influenced the choice of our newest families. Our most significant increase is evident in kindergarten (with 788 students) and the elementary school. The

number of students Reach currently serves in grades K-5 is more than our entire school was last year, now with 3,984 students - - high school follows with 2,677 students enrolled and middle school with 2,136 students. Families have come to Reach to leave “roadblocks in brick-and-mortar schools that involved students and staff.” Another mentioned that they were looking for flexibility so they can “work in the family landscape business.” Some were looking for stability in the face of COVID, afraid to return to brick-and-mortar schools, and yet others were looking for a supportive and encouraging environment in school.

This school year my colleagues and I, at PA’s 14 public cyber charter schools, took on 25,000+ new students! Cybers didn’t miss a beat since March 2020, when Wolf closed schools, opening our doors to new students after March 13 with no compensation, as well as continued offers to share our expertise and support to our brick-and-mortar colleagues in district, charter and private schools. We are all grateful to be able to serve these families and welcomed them with open arms!

Reach families tell us that they have “nothing but praises to share about REACH”. One parent was worried in the beginning of the school year, but is very pleased at how easy it is to contact the teachers and get responses. She states that this pandemic has been a blessing and a curse, in that it brought her and her first-grader to us. She hopes that she can find a way to continue here when she has to go back to work. She loves it here and her daughter is thriving.

Another parent shared that Reach has been a great decision for her daughter and she has been telling all of her friends to switch their kids to Reach. She said that she was hesitant when they joined because her daughter was having such a hard time getting engaged but between my constant meetings with the student, and the constant compassion and support her daughter is getting from her other teachers, she knows that she made the right decision. She said that her family was even thinking about keeping her student at Reach even if brick-and-mortar schools open up because of how much progress she sees in her daughter. Not only has her reading gotten better, but her

confidence has been increasing after every meeting. She said she always goes out of her way to recommend Reach to families!

Yet another parent shared that she is so happy that her daughter is enrolled at Reach. She feels strongly that Reach's approach is different than that of the brick-and-mortar school she used to attend. The history curriculum is better represented at Reach as we do not just teach things that make America look good, but all pertinent history. She is also impressed with other course curriculum and the creativity of her teachers with assignments. In addition to this, the Family Mentor wanted to share that one student today (who is normally reserved) was excited to find that one of her Modified Assignments includes reading about Rosa Parks! I was excited to discover this with her as we found her modified assignments on her teacher's message board!

We have increased our staff in every department. We have increased our intervention teams of reading and math specialists, as well as incorporated Literacy Coaches. Reach has expanded our Credit Recovery teacher team, increased our School Counselor and Social Work teams, and increased our Family Mentor team. We have dedicated the past several months to building a strong certified team of general and special education professionals, and administrators to serve our Reach community. Despite the influx in new students, we continue to provide an robust onboarding experience for students, families, and staff to ensure everyone is set-up for success.

Additionally, we have built a schedule of increased whole group, small group and one-on-one instructional opportunities that complement the established and growing curriculum provided by our partner, Pearson Online and Blended Learning. Our STEM opportunities (an integral part of our charter) have blossomed for our learners with nearly 30 virtual camps being offered including PennDOT Challenge, Environmental, Weather STEM, WeDO Lego and 3D printing, as well as weekly STEM club and project-based learning.

For the first time, colleges and universities have come to us seeking pre-service field experience and student-teaching experiences for their students. We are working with Penn State University, Chestnut Hill College, Eastern University, Bloomsburg University, Messiah College and California University of Pennsylvania, to name a few. They understand the need and value for their students to have experience teaching in a virtual setting.

Similar to other schools (both brick-and-mortar and cyber), Reach has faced challenges during the pandemic in identifying and increasing academic achievement during this pandemic. We use quarterly benchmarking to determine the strengths and needs of our students. We have seen incremental growth from benchmark to benchmark in math, English language arts and science. Staff monitors progress through daily contacts with students, lesson completion, passing rates and benchmarks. We also had to cease in-person supports including face-to-face activities, related therapies, and home and community visits provided by our team of Family Mentors. However, we were able to offer nearly all students in special education-required therapies, virtual related services to provide a free appropriate public education!

Additionally, Reach has had to prepare for a return to face-to-face activities with purchases of personal protective equipment (through CARES Act funding) for events, including state testing held in over 33 different locations throughout Pennsylvania. Preparing and implementing state testing for a cyber school population is no small feat. During this pandemic time, many of the sites we formally arranged have downsized due to capacity requirements and some have closed their doors. Our families came to us for safety and are deeply concerned about sending their children out to testing sites. We have also utilized these funds to hire more staff, including special education teachers, intervention specialists, and to purchase math and intervention programs.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to speak with you today.