

PA House Education Committee

Public Hearing:

Continuity of Education Programs Offered by Public Schools During COVID-19
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Testimony of Lenny McAllister
CEO, Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools

Good Morning Chairman Sonney, Chairman Longiotti, and Honorable Members of the House Education Committee. I am Lenny McAllister, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS). Our Coalition is the coalesced voice of public charter schools throughout the Keystone State, representing both brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools. We stand for the best K -12 options for each child in our state and we advocate for the rights of students, charter operators, educators, and parents. Currently, there are more than 169,000 students in public brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools across Pennsylvania – including an increase of more than 25,000 who have enrolled for the first time in the 2020-21 school year.

Over the course of history, millions of us – and our forefathers – have been forced to deal with complex issues and subsequent impacts that reverberated throughout communities for generations. On the international stage, we have dealt with multiple wars, including two world wars and other deadly conflicts that have shaped lives for better and worse. On the domestic front, we have toiled with a bane of American society that is rooted in legacy systemic inequalities and ongoing behaviors that entrench a civic vulnerability within our national fabric. On the global scale, we have faced and endured both man-made tragedies, such as economic collapses, and “acts of God” such as epidemics and pandemics.

Throughout these events, there are “lessons learned” that future generations have been able to observe over time, gleaning both wisdom and direction for future endeavors because of those life-shaping experiences. One such understanding is that a perseverance of character and an unyielding focus on justice, advancement, and success are vital so people may gather the courage and perform the challenging tasks that are necessary to secure a better way of life after wide-scale hardship occurs. Another cornerstone for survival and success is that cumbersome bureaucracies do not often adjust well during times of crisis; instead, innovation, flexibility, and timely responsiveness are critical in dealing with circumstances where tragedy and triumph of the spirit are at a crossroads.

Thankfully for our nation, some of the instances where innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness were ignored throughout history, favored stability and improvement for the United States. For example, the inability of autocratic German leadership to swiftly navigate and adjust to the harsh Russian winter of 1941 made Operation Barbarossa a failure and turned the tide for the Allies in World War II. The unwieldy bureaucratic form of central government ended up failing both the Soviet economic system and its military, leading to its economic collapse and eventual demise of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, despite the Russians’

previous advantages in space technology and nuclear might. Yet, there are also prominent examples where innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness to crisis shaped our nation proactively. The multi-faceted approaches to secure equality by way of economic boycotts, cultural pressures through non-violent protests, and fact-based litigation allowed perpetual underdogs – poor, abused, and disenfranchised Americans for generations – to create a blueprint for advancing civil rights across the world. That example is a beacon that we all still extol, especially during Black History Month.

In dealing with occurrences of widespread illness, history has provided insights into the value of innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness based on current events and facts, not rigid systems and common practices. For example, during the 1918-19 Flu Epidemic, responsive leadership in cities such as St. Louis allowed their constituents to avert larger tragedies through the spread of the disease, while cities such as Philadelphia were doomed to avoidable losses of life due to regimented practices that eschewed different tactics that deviated from “what we always do”.

The lessons of innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness are playing out in the 2020-21 COVID-19 Pandemic as well. During the last session, the General Assembly unanimously passed House Bill 2463, asking for increased transparency and hinting towards increased cooperation between the executive branch and the legislative branch of this Commonwealth. Why would Democrats and Republicans, groups that hardly find common ground on much of anything in recent years, come together in such a way? It was because the “lessons learned” from previous historic events was proven true once again. Our Commonwealth continues to suffer through harrowing unemployment numbers and the inconsistencies of the Commonwealth’s unemployment system. Pushback was significant against the processes through which business shutdowns were administered and a vague business waivers system was implemented. Other healthcare concerns rocked nursing home residents and vulnerable Pennsylvanians alike. After months of shared civic trauma, policymakers and their constituents looked back and acknowledged: dealing with complex challenges by way of a “one-size-fits-all” approach that is driven unilaterally is usually bound to fail.

With this in view, Pennsylvania families collectively showed appreciation that the “one-size-fits-all” model of education is not the exclusive method of learning in the Keystone State. This is a trend that has been expanding over recent years, with an increase of over 80 percent in charter school enrollment over the past decade according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This trend was emerging even before the pandemic hit our communities, a scourge that has prompted school districts from my native Pittsburgh to Philadelphia to remain closed to in-person instruction since March 2020. Due to the increased appetite for school choice within public education, now coupled with the challenges from COVID-19, we continue to see a shift towards more families exercising school choice. Multiple reports indicate that over 30,000 schoolchildren have left school districts to enroll in various school choice options as districts continue to struggle with the challenges of the pandemic. While thousands of students have enrolled in non-public school options, including private and parochial schools that have provided both in-person and hybrid models of learning safely since August, over 25,000 Pennsylvanians have turned to public charter schools since August.

Members of this Committee, there are a range of reasons why Pennsylvania families continue to enact their lawful right to school choice. These reasons are tied to the same lessons learned during other moments of crisis throughout history:

Innovation. Flexibility. Responsiveness to people, not systems.

Many critics of public charter schools prefer to focus primarily on public cyber charter schools during the pandemic. Whereas it is obvious that these public charter schools were optimally prepared for online learning in Pennsylvania, perhaps it is more appropriate to focus initially on the successes that many brick-and-mortar public charter schools across the Commonwealth have commandeered since last March.

Just as school districts were forced to work to ensure the technological and healthcare support of their school communities, public charter school leaders and educators worked endlessly as well to create environments where academic instruction and the school communities for their schoolchildren were consistent, stable, and available for support during these unprecedented times. Whereas schools across the Commonwealth struggled to get technology and internet access to their students in both rural and urban settings, our Coalition worked with public charter schools in a collaboration with our business partners and industry experts to offer school leaders options that were – in real time – responsive to the challenges and needs of their specific communities. Further, we reached out across all sectors of education (i.e., to district schools, private schools, and parochial schools) across the country and “across the pond” internationally to provide real-time professional development to prepare school leaders and teachers for the “new world of education” that the rest of the 2019-2020 school year and our current school year morphed into.

Yet, through this, the focus for these educators was not merely to provide access to teachers or a review of previous coursework. Brick-and-mortar public charter schools focused on providing ongoing academic instruction, working to find ways to build upon the lessons of the school year prior to COVID to ensure that the building blocks of the previous 3 quarters of the year were not lost in the spring of 2020. These schools provided professional development to their teachers to help them prepare to better provide online instruction during the 4th quarter of the 2019-2020 school year, with a focus on hybrid instruction and/or in-person instruction for the 2020-2021 school year. Through the flexibility provided them by the innovation-driven 1997 Charter School Law, these administrators and educators had the flexibility to reassign staff to support hybrid or virtual learning based on current and emerging skillsets within the staff. They were also capable of modifying their approaches rapidly as they responded to student needs and parental observations. Like all of us, they realized that this would be tough, but with cooperation throughout their schools’ communities – from parents to students to staff members – they stabilized an unsettling situation and refocused students on their studies, even as many other items around them in their lives were failing. This value is immense, especially as we hear more reports around the nation of the mental health impact that the school shutdowns in districts throughout the country are having on our youth collectively.

Through this persistent effort, public charter schools such as Avon Grove Charter School in Chester County have made the most of real-time innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness, being nimble enough to learn the “new world of education” this year. At a clip that was more

responsive to their community's needs and at a clip faster than the local school district, these school leaders trusted science and industry best practices to bring students back into the classroom safely – all while adhering to federal guidelines and recommendations established by the CDC and Department of Health. Thankfully, we have seen this level of commitment, innovation, and service across the public charter community throughout the Commonwealth, from examples in the Lehigh Valley such as Executive Education Academy Charter School to towns across the Keystone State.

Where brick-and-mortar public charter schools must adjust their actions to serve during this pandemic while navigating the physical safety concerns of in-person instruction as have school districts throughout this past school year, public cyber charter schools were primed to leverage their decades of experience in online instruction to provide a professional, streamlined, and robust academic experience for thousands of students during the midst of this crisis. In fact, charter leaders from public cyber schools were uniquely positioned and prepared to respond when Governor Wolf closed brick-and-mortar schools in March. Since then, these full-fledged schools have continued educating their students without experiencing any gap in services or loss in learning. For over 20 years, public cyber charter schools have provided a full online school experience, featuring the flexibility needed to meet the unique needs of their students. Over the years, the student bodies of these schools have ranged from Olympic athletes and actors to students undergoing medical treatment that restrict them from attending a physical classroom. For years, those within the public cyber charter community have understood that the notion of “one-size-fits-all” in education is a tragic misnomer that has ruined the potential of thousands of Pennsylvanians over the years. They know that innovation matters in a rapidly changing world. They also fully know a lesson that school districts and Pennsylvania families learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic: that a virtual program offered by a typical school is not equal to the value of a fully-invested public cyber charter school – from its delivery of services to its bedrock of school unity and community. If flexibility and responsiveness mattered in the 21st century prior to March 2020, Pennsylvania learned that school choice in public education was crucial for our young people after March 13, 2020.

Using these lessons learned as foundations to move forward from, public cyber charter schools stepped up to lead and serve when these unprecedented times demanded action and sacrifice. Over this past 12 months, Pennsylvania's public cyber charter leaders and their staffs have assisted brick-and-mortar public charter schools and private schools across the Commonwealth in transitioning to cyber learning models when asked by providing best practices and support. They did this while tending to the increased clamoring for growing enrollment into Pennsylvania's public cyber charter schools. Their collective commitment to supporting brick-and-mortar schools whenever possible has been noteworthy and should be commended during these challenging times. Further, these leaders have reached out to district schools to “lend a hand” to their fellow Pennsylvanians. Unfortunately for schoolchildren, only two school districts – out of hundreds in the Keystone State - reached out to the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools to request guidance and expertise from public cyber charter school leaders.

When Pennsylvania families sought the expertise of these cyber leaders to directly benefit their children – enrolling over 20,000 students in public cyber charter schools since March – this sector of the public charter school community responded to families' needs. Public cyber charter schools rapidly increased hiring to ensure that the student-to-teacher ratios were appropriate and

engaged by highly qualified staffers. These educators leveraged the innovation found throughout the sector of education, pivoting into new ways to teach classrooms that were suddenly a blend of experienced cyber students and newly-enrolled transfer students – all youngsters dealing with a once-in-a-century pandemic that also impacted their mental and emotional health. And while these challenging dynamics stretched public cyber charter schools’ perspectives on innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness, these schools were also stretched to redefine their commitment as Americans and neighbors within our Commonwealth. Despite receiving no compensation for any new student enrolled from March 13 to June 30 of last year due to last-minute lobbying that neglected Pennsylvania schoolchildren for the sake of protecting systems for adults, Pennsylvania’s public cyber charter schools opened their virtual doors to more than 1,500 new students after Governor Wolf closed schools. While systems successfully protected their funding in March, these children lost \$4.9 million in taxpayer funds that school districts kept after families chose to exercise their lawful enjoyment of school choice within public education by enrolling their children public cyber charter schools. With that reality looming, public cyber charter schools made a choice: they were committed to serving children and extolling the common good in education and chose to put the interests of students first. To them, it was more important to be flexible and responsive to families’ needs in our common moment of crisis. On behalf of our Coalition, I commend them for this selflessness, as this crisis – like many others in history – highlight our better angels for some and our lesser ones as well.

There are items that we knew about ourselves that became heightened in importance during the 12 months since the pandemic closed many school districts to in-person instruction. For starters, it became even more noteworthy to understand that Pennsylvania’s public charter schools educate higher percentages of low-income, special education and minority students than school districts. Keeping this in mind, it is clear that our students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic – from a healthcare perspective, an economic perspective, and a mental health perspective. Inequities in many aspects including access to technology have been striking. When remembering the impact of the pandemic and the turbulence rocking our nation culturally on issues of race and politics, a resonating reminder to us all in Pennsylvania takes root: those of us disproportionately serving the underserved, overlooked, and discriminated against in our state have an oversized role in ensuring that we provide academic stability, opportunity, and advancement for these youth – especially now – as our efforts might be their last best hope for self-sufficiency and inclusion into the American Dream. For public charter schools, our work is amplified by the crystalizing realities due to the pandemic. For multiple generations, a monopolized approach to public education has failed Black and Brown children in communities across Pennsylvania. For decades, that approach has facilitated maladies including the school-to-prison pipeline that has decimated urban communities across the nation. Currently, studies are showing that these same communities are at great risk of falling permanently behind yet again. Already, roughly 3 million are “falling off of the academic grid” due to closed schools according to Bellweather Education Partners, a national nonprofit organization that specializes in the needs of underserved youth. Innovative, flexible, and responsive public charter schools serve to bridge the gap over the abyss too many Pennsylvanians are at risk of falling into. That has been shown over the past 12 months. That foundation of trust and community should never be attacked again moving forward if the best interests of our Commonwealth are paramount.

Through this pandemic, it has become self-evident to us within the charter school community – a collection of over 169,000 students this school year along with their families, teachers,

administrators, and advocates – that school choice within public education is a must in the 21st century. It is vital that we concur that the “one-size-fits-all” model of education that pre-dates the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th Century must be permanently replaced with rudimentary yet pliant policies that allow all roads of education – district, charter, private, and parochial – to lead to success for more Pennsylvania K-12 students. School choice must be supported as a constant – not a debatable consideration - for success for all Pennsylvanians moving forward if the best interests of our Commonwealth are paramount.

We learned that public district schools and public charter schools must end the toxic competition between them – a mindset driven by money that often does not give a thought towards the children impacted by this bickering. Healthy competition within public education can lead towards collaboration in times of current crisis and common bonds when we endure over COVID – a collaboration that simply did not materialize as it should have during the most pressing of times for some of Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable residents.

We learned that adjustments to charter law that leverage additional innovations in education to prepare students for the workforce should be non-partisan and non-controversial policies to enact. Policies such as dual enrollment for all public school students (including public charter school students) can create more options for Pennsylvania families to benefit from their tax dollars and prepare our youth for bright futures. This would make Pennsylvania a more viable state for our neighbors to live, learn, work, play, and retire. That would be in the best interests of our Commonwealth.

We learned – along with millions of Pennsylvanians - that virtual programs at district schools are not equivalent to public cyber charter schools. School districts that provide hastily comprised online education have learned that transferring a brick-and-mortar model of education online simply will not work. There is a unique value for public cyber charter education and a unique set of variables that these schools must mind for regularly. Their experiences over the years are hard lessons learned now being felt by school districts and select private schools over the past 12 months, even as students fall behind in the process. The value of this skillset must not be overlooked by the General Assembly moving forward, as this skillset has been validated and appreciated by thousands of Pennsylvania families since March 2020. The way we interact with, monitor, evaluate, and modify online education must be viewed as its own sector of education. Applying public cyber charter schools’ performances to brick-and-mortar test scores, for example, has now been shown as faulty, as we currently see school districts struggling with online instruction in many instances. Many districts find themselves often behind the 20-year learning curve that the innovators in Pennsylvania’s 14 public cyber charter schools have already navigated. Their collective journey of innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness is one we must employ to make education better in the best interests of our Commonwealth.

We learned that more students than ever in Pennsylvania are experiencing a comprehensive public cyber charter school education. Because they are enrolled in schools experienced in providing cyber education, these students generally are not experiencing regression in their academic advancement. And yet, even these schools are not been immune to challenges during the pandemic. Neither are public brick-and-mortar charter schools. The charter community still faces special education challenges, state testing concerns, and the community concerns for families disproportionately suffering during COVID. Wrongly, they have sadly faced these

challenges in vacuums, often not receiving adequate information and support from Intermediate Units (IUs) and the Department of Public Education, as most of the emergency processes directed by these entities are driven through to school districts – and often stopping there. Governor Wolf’s famous words in 2020 – “we’re in this together” - have sadly not applied to the public education realm in many instances when it has come to sharing of information, technical resources, coordination of vaccinations for public school staffers (i.e., charter schools are public schools), and “items of concern” in dealing with plans for both this past semester and impending academic quarters. Although the innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness that public charter schools utilize daily since 1997 have helped us as a community be more interactive and accommodating to the needs of Pennsylvania families, many opportunities for collaboration and shared insights between all sectors of education in the Keystone State were lost due to the corroded interplay between school districts and public charter schools. We must not allow this to continue. It is our hope that we have not lost the lives of many Pennsylvanians in the years ahead because of the inartful and unwelcoming manner that education leaders have addressed school choice and its leaders within varying sectors of education in this critical moment. Children’s lives must always be more important than professional career concerns. Families will predominately seek the best options for their beloved children. Increasingly in Pennsylvania and throughout the nation, they see the value of – and want more access to – school choice, including school choice within public education. The pandemic has only stoked these desires because of our innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness.

A forced hand will likely not heal this toxic dynamic, but a brokered peace can eventually foster a trust that can allow winners on all sides of public education to prosper again – perhaps permanently forgoing the “us vs. them” battle that has been waged for years with thousands of children lost in the process. The Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, alongside over 169,000 students and their families and school communities, reaches out to fellow Pennsylvanians from all walks of life to work through this pandemic, stabilize education for schoolchildren regardless of the schools where they are enrolled, and heal our Commonwealth of the injuries within our society that were highlighted during the historic times of 2020 that pain us still today. If we can do what is best for Pennsylvania schoolchildren, we will do what is right for Pennsylvania overall. We can do so in a manner that uplifts equality, promotes justice, and advances prosperity for all. That is in the best interest of our Commonwealth. It is with that hope fully in heart and mind that, on behalf of our Coalition, I 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 listen their stories, and empower all parents regardless of socioeconomic background to make the best decisions for their children – remembering that we help Pennsylvania when we give families the choice to find the best schools to foster their children’s potential for life.

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Lenny McAllister
CEO, Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools
www.pacharters.org