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Testimony of Dr. Stacy Gill-Phillips, CEO
West Philadelphia Achievement Charter Elementary School

Greetings members of the House Education Committee:

I am Dr. Stacy Gill-Phillips, founder and CEO of the West Philadelphia Achievement Charter Elementary School, locally known as WPACES.

WPACES is a K-5 Title I public charter school serving 650 scholars and their families, of whom approximately 98 percent are African American. I am honored to share my testimony before the House Education Committee regarding WPACES' COVID-19 survival efforts.

As we move through our eleventh month of mandated virtual learning, a glimpse of light shines in the distance. The vaccine is finally here. One might think our prayers for this pandemic to end have been answered, but that is the farthest thing from the truth. We are only just beginning. In our Philadelphia communities, we have before us the challenge of vaccine trust issues, the COVID learning slide, and parental apprehensions regarding in-person instruction. This is in addition to maintaining a robust virtual learning environment, safe in-person school environment, and planning a smooth transition back into the building for hundreds of students.

I would like to share some thoughts on how our charter school and many others are faring through it all:

Many public charter schools in the City of Philadelphia are utilizing a fully virtual learning model, distributing food to the community on a regular basis, ensuring connectivity is maintained for their student, and providing mental health services for scholars and families at an unprecedented level.

For the West Philadelphia Achievement Charter Elementary School, we are in the unique position to hold a dual perspective on this pandemic. Our one perspective comes from our long-standing as a charter school of 20 years. Our other perspective is as an African American founded and led charter school serving mostly Black families. We have the added burden of addressing these challenges coupled with the perpetual need to advocate against the extreme inequities and disparities that exist against minorities in general and minority-led charter schools.

In August 2020, WPACES reopened our school utilizing a full virtual model for regular education students and a hybrid model for our special education students. We realized from the prior school year that our most vulnerable, among an already vulnerable population, are our special education and kindergarten students. During the first few days of the 2020-2021 school

year, we ushered in approximately 125 kindergarten students into the building in small groups (wearing masks and practicing social distance protocols) to meet their teachers face-to-face before going online. The students were also given the opportunity to tour their classrooms, see where they would sit and practice logging online. This made for a smooth transition online for the youngest members of our community and their parents.

Before school began in August, we also surveyed all of our special education parents to gauge their interest in in-person learning through a hybrid learning model. Approximately 30 percent of our parents indicated that they wanted their children to participate. The remaining 70 percent felt fearful returning their children to the building.

Further into the school year, our truant students emerged as “at-risk” as well. WPACES engaged our counselor and climate team to conduct home visits for all students with who we could not make a consistent connection online. (We conducted all visits from the door, wearing masks and keeping six feet apart). We completed a truancy elimination plan onsite with the parent. In cases where the elimination plan did not improve attendance, the student was invited to participate in face-to-face instruction.

The choices our school has made to address the challenges created by this pandemic have proven to be critical to the successful education of our student population. One example of this success is one of our 3rd-grade students. This student was absent from school for 25 out of 32 days. During a home visit, we discovered that he was the back seat passenger in his mother’s car while she worked as an Uber Eats delivery person. She was a single mom who lost her job due to the pandemic. We quickly issued the student and his mom an internet hotspot and headphones to go along with his school laptop. Shortly thereafter, we were able to refer mom to a learning pod resource during the day so that she could go to work.

Resources:

To further mitigate COVID-19 challenges, WPACES established partnerships with PSC Learning Pods and local childcare centers. PCS Learning Pods provided free online learning support to students in the community. Learning pods became a rampant learning support model in affluent neighborhoods but was nonexistent in low-income minority communities.

Childcare centers represent another critical resource in supporting WPACES families. I applaud our government officials for changing funding practices to allow school-aged children to attend childcare centers during the school day. This enabled Philadelphia public charter schools to partner with childcare providers to support online learning during the school day at little or no cost to parents.

Challenges:

One of the significant challenges of having children onsite during the peak of this pandemic is managing the frequency of quarantine closures while preserving our instructional program's integrity. While we experienced a small number of closures due to actual COVID-19 positive cases, closures from the threat of possible COVID exposures were higher. We can also happily report that since August 2020, we have had zero transmissions stemming from our school.

We continue to be challenged with maintaining technology and connectivity in the homes. A significant number of our families, prior to March 2020, never had internet or a computer in their home. Philadelphia's public charter school community was challenged in the spring to access technology at the same rate as the School District of Philadelphia and we continue to work through internet connectivity challenges. Getting technology in our families' hands was just the first step, we needed to provide our students and their parents with training on how to use and properly care for those devices.

Another challenge of hybrid learning during the pandemic has been staffing. While our lead teachers have been dependable, we struggled to maintain consistency amongst our teacher support staff. Despite this challenge, teachers are thriving. Here are a few examples of how teachers perceive this experience:

- *“Upon being asked to consider in-person teaching during the pandemic, I knew there was only one place I should be, and for me, it was in the building with my students. Having the building open and to be with my students has not been easy, and there is daily uncertainty of what the day may bring, but I know I am safe, I am not alone, and I am supported by the administration and coworkers.”*
- *“Every day of the pandemic has posed a new challenge, a new opportunity to grow and improve as a teacher, but ultimately, each day is not about me, but rather how I will connect with my students.”*
- *“Overall, I know there is no substitute for an in-person teacher. My students are benefiting from being in the classroom, and I eagerly await the return of teachers and students to the building where they belong.”*
- *“Having the students talk about their weekend, being able to ask a question without worrying about sound issues, or just complaining about the school lunch, are some of the daily interactions my students have been able to participate in easily while being in person.”*

Support:

We are grateful for the support we have received at the local, state, and federal levels. Thank you for the support. Locally we have received reliable, consistent, and timely communication. This has helped us stay abreast of changing guidelines, added resources, and new initiatives such as internet, transportation, and vaccinations that benefit our students, parents, and staff.

Philadelphia public charter schools, which operate on an extremely tight budget, benefited greatly from the CARES Act money distributed by the federal government, and allocated by the PA Department of Education and the General Assembly. We used those funds to purchase equipment and tools to ensure the students and staff who were back in our buildings this year are safe and healthy. We also greatly appreciate that the General Assembly fully-funded all public schools this year and did so very quickly to ensure we had one less thing to worry about. I know that Governor Wolf has proposed significant funding cuts to charter school students, specifically those receiving special education services. I would like to stress how devastating any funding

cuts would be for our children, especially in Philadelphia where the governor's plan would slash special education funding by half for our students.

Innovation:

The pandemic has forced us to dig deep to identify new and better ways to accomplish the monumental task of safely educating our students. Using our CARES Act funds, we invested in a campus-wide tracking system that helped us know who is on campus and when to contact the student's teacher to prep students for pickup and online health checks. We invested in a system that would give us a clear view of all building-wide activities. The CARES Act funds helped us participate in the National Summer School Initiative, which enabled us to provide a robust virtual summer school option for our entire upper school population.

Moving forward:

We plan to have all teachers who choose to be vaccinated by the end of March, return to the building for an April 12th reopening. All students will remain online until teachers can transition into the building and get their classrooms prepared for their students' return. Upon return, all students will receive instruction on a hybrid schedule for the remainder of the school year. Students will be assigned an A or B schedule. All special education students will be both A & B.

We intend to use some of the ESSER funds to address any learning losses for regular and special education students through tutoring, after-school programming, summer programming, direct instruction, instruction resources, etc. While no one knows for sure what lies ahead, we predict we will need the following to be addressed for our WPACES community:

- Emotional support for both staff and students to re-acclimate themselves back into a community setting.
- Retraining our brains, resetting our clock, and reestablishing the skill of working together collaboratively.
- Continuing to engage our instructors who have joined our virtual community from all around the country.
- Continuing to be a strong advocate for maintaining equal and equitable funding for our most vulnerable population, our special needs children.
- Continuing to harness the power of our parents as instructors and support them conquer challenges.
- Maintaining and build upon the innovations born out of this pandemic.
- Continuing to advocate against the many biases and inequities that exist for minority founded and led schools, especially the lack of philanthropic funding, disproportionate non-renewal recommendations, and limited expansion opportunities.
 - There should be no thought of school closures during a pandemic. Even during a pandemic, African-American founded and led public charter schools – which

serve our most vulnerable populations – are being recommended for closure. Nationally and locally, the rate of closure for minority-led charter schools is disproportionate to non-minority charter schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences in educating our students during the COVID-19 pandemic with this esteemed committee.

Dr. Stacy Phillips, Founder/CEO
West Philadelphia Achievement Charter Elementary School