



PA Senate Education Hearing April 19, 2021

Testimony of Eileen Cannistraci, CEO for Insight PA Cyber Charter School

Good morning Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and Members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Eileen Cannistraci, and I am the CEO at Insight PA Cyber Charter School. Insight PA is committed to providing all students with a high quality, innovative, and individualized cyber charter school education, in which each student is encouraged to achieve academic excellence and to become a life-long learner, and where each student has the opportunity to explore career opportunities beginning in 8th grade. We understand that education is the pathway to help young people explore their career aspirations and develop the essential skills that will help them to be successful citizens of our great commonwealth. Insight PA is also a member of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for allowing me to share my reflections as a public charter school leader. Like you, I believe our educational system can be improved, I have seen it improved, by encouraging educators to focus on students first and by encouraging parents to choose the best educational model for their children. Also, like you, I want to improve the educational opportunities for all students throughout Pennsylvania so that our children will have a bright future and can contribute meaningfully to our great Commonwealth.

A bit of background, I have worked in public education for the over 25 years, initially as a teacher in a brick and mortar school in Philadelphia before transferring to a public cyber charter school in 2001. I made the switch because I understood that technology could be utilized to provide equity to students who live in poor communities. I was a principal in a public cyber charter school for 10 years, where I learned the importance of building relationships with parents in order to design programs that support individualized learning. Now, as the CEO of Insight PA Cyber Charter School, I know the value of community partnerships to ensure our students have experiences that will help them become valued members of their communities.

During my time working in the public cyber charter school community, I have heard many firsthand accounts of how cyber schools have positively impacted students in our Commonwealth, students who have fallen behind academically, or who have suffered socially and emotionally as well as students who do not fit into the traditional model of education whose lives have been positively impacted through the opportunity to learn in a cyber charter school. Cyber charter schools provide the opportunity for students to stay engaged in public education and complete their formal education by earning their high school diploma. These students may have otherwise dropped out of school, or may have never understood their potential to make positive contributions to their communities. Students like Jamera who attempted suicide due to extreme bullying she experienced at the traditional school she attended, who is now thriving at Insight PA pursuing a career in modeling while writing a blog for students who experience bullying. Cyber charter schools are a godsend for students like Pearl, who was struggling academically and whose parents described her as “her light was dimmed.” But, thanks to the dedicated

and caring teachers she works with at Insight PA, Pearl's parents say, "she now dreams again, now plays again, and now has hope of promising tomorrow." These students are the reason why I am so passionate about school choice in public education and the work I do for the cyber charter school community.

Insight PA Cyber Charter School opened in 2017 with an enrollment of just over 400 students, and 32 staff. We are now in our fourth year of operation and we currently serve 4,500 students and employ over 300 extremely talented and dedicated staff. We also currently serve students and families from nearly every county in Pennsylvania.

Our student population is extremely diverse: 57 percent of our students are economically disadvantaged, 36 percent of our students are Black, and 15 percent of our students are Hispanic. Approximately 20 percent of our students have identified learning disabilities. Our diversity, in which we pride ourselves for the educational opportunities it provides our students, is significantly greater than the diversity of the majority of traditional school districts within the commonwealth.

Our vision is to ignite a desire for learning in every student and nurture them to understand their goals and create a clear path to achieve them. We utilize technology to individualize student learning and provide our students with opportunities to engage in career pathway programming that gives them coursework and real work experience. Students like Jamera and Pearl are seizing these opportunities and identifying their strengths and talents in the supportive learning environment that Insight PA provides for them. Parents throughout the Commonwealth are choosing Insight PA for the betterment of their children because we provide opportunities for students to engage, learn and succeed.

Through my many years of working in public education, I have learned and value that "*One size fits all*" education does not respect individual learners or meet the needs of diverse learners who each have their own strengths and skills to offer their communities. As community leaders, even in our own families, we see very distinct learners with very different skills and talents, each of whom we try to nurture to become strong, independently minded, successful adults. We, as educators, legislators, and parents, want the same for each of our children.

Public cyber charter schools provide a vital service to students throughout the Commonwealth and have been an essential source of consistent education during the pandemic. Thanks to visionary educators and legislators who established cyber charter schools in 2002, Pennsylvania's students have had the option to attend public cyber charter schools for nearly two decades. Schools that provided consistent, high quality education as well as the supports and services that students desperately needed to achieve their academic goals.

I support educational reforms, but Governor Wolf's charter proposal is not the solution and cutting funding for any public school is not in the best interest of students. PA's public charter schools educate a higher percentage of low-income students, minority students and students with special education needs – and yet we receive about 25 percent less funding per student than school districts. No public school student should be targeted for a funding cut based on the school they attend. With every funding cut, another educational opportunity is lost. An opportunity that students like Jamera and Pearl cannot afford. And if the past year of the pandemic has shown us anything, it is that students and parents are valuing cyber charter education more than ever before. This alone should provide a call to action for both educators and legislators to prioritize public cyber charter access for all students.

Governor Wolf's proposal recommends a \$99 million cut for charter school students receiving special education services. I oppose any cut to special education services. Our students deserve equitable funding that supports the services they require. Across PA's 14 public, cyber charter schools approximately 80 percent of our students requiring special education services enrolled in our schools with an existing Individualized Education Plan (IEP) from their school district of residence or private school they previously attended. The remaining students are identified through Child Find and our Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model, which is a data driven model for providing needed interventions through effective progress monitoring. Every public charter school in the state, including Insight PA must provide supports and services for all students identified with learning disabilities. Cuts in funding will limit our ability to provide necessary services to the students who need our support the most.

Increasing educational opportunities is the key to solving many of Pennsylvania's educational shortfalls. An easy reform that would positively impact thousands of students across Pennsylvania would be to include charter school students in dual enrollment opportunities. Currently, charter school students are discriminated against due to being excluded from participating in dual enrollment and dual credit opportunities because of the public school they attend. Passing this small legislative change (introduced as SB237 by Sen. Bartolotta and HB358 by Rep. Marshall) would drastically improve pathways to post-secondary educational opportunities for students, like our current 200 graduating seniors, and encourage more students to explore college opportunities without incurring insurmountable debt loads.

I also would like to advocate for an independent funding commission, spearheaded by the General Assembly, to study all aspects of public school funding and offer that PA's public charter schools stand ready to collaborate on a plan for future funding that focuses on students and not institutions. Many public schools across Pennsylvania are struggling financially. For many, the pandemic exacerbated the financial challenges. An independent funding commission could look to support all public school students.

Charter schools, like all public schools, have many accountability measures which include federal, state and local reporting requirements. Charter schools however have increased accountability through the charter application/renewal process. Unlike school districts, which are guaranteed to exist, charter schools must complete a renewal process every three to five years that determines if the school can continue to operate. In addition, charter schools are accountable to the parents and students they serve. Unlike school districts where a parent's choice is limited by their zip code, charter schools must meet the expectations of parents who choose them for their children. And, as we have seen throughout the pandemic, communities are demanding more choice and more accountability from their educational institutions.

I firmly believe that we all value student success above all. In my 28 years of working in public education, I know public cyber charter schools are essential to that goal. Particularly for students like Jamera and Pearl, whose lives have been positively impacted by their experiences at Insight PA. Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing, and I want to extend an invitation for any member of the Senate Education Committee to visit Insight PA at our headquarters in Exton. I would love to provide you with a personal tour of our office and new academic wing developed for our teaching staff. I welcome you to call on me to utilize my expertise to seek solutions that can benefit all students.

