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Chairman Martin, Minority Chair Williams and Members of the Committee:

My name is Brian Hayden, and I am the CEO of The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School. On behalf of the almost 12,000 students enrolled at PA Cyber and their families, thank you for holding this hearing on education reform.

At PA Cyber, we say that the learning never stops. As we enter the thirteenth month of educating during the pandemic, we believe that we have had many of our best practices affirmed as PA Cyber students continued to receive full day, planned instruction, participate in extracurricular activities, and were provided support and assistance as needed. We are proud of the ways in which we have served our students and their families over the past two school years.

At PA Cyber, we are committed to engaging with every person and organization that has an impact on public schools. We have consistently sought out ways to work with the Administration, the General Assembly, the PDE, unions and organizations representing traditional public schools on ways to improve, change, and reform all sectors of public education, including cyber charter schools. During these engagements, we have proposed reforms, we have endorsed some reform proposals that have been suggested, and we continue to seek solutions to improve the manner in which we educate the students of the Commonwealth. However, these discussions need to be based on fact not perception, be transparent, cannot treat our students as second-class citizens and above all be fair.

FACT vs. PERCEPTION

Any effort to find common ground on reform must be rooted in a shared set of facts, and right now, there is a significant disconnect between the perception of cyber charter schools and the reality of cyber charter schools.



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Each and every time an organization, a news outlet, a trade association or an elected official misrepresents the reality of cyber charter schools, the discourse needed to create meaningful reform is harmed. We, as cyber school educators, accept some of the responsibility for these misconceptions being so prevalent as we have clearly not been as effective as we need to be in educating policy makers and the general public on how we operate. But I would suggest that the blame is equally shared by those that make unfounded statements and accusations about cyber charter schools in an effort to sway public opinion. In an effort to dispel some of the most commonly heard or read misconceptions about cyber charter schools, let me state the following:

We are not private schools as some of stated; we are public schools and as such do not “charge tuition” as some have said. We are funded with the same tax dollars that fund all public schools, and because we receive public funding like all schools, we are held to the same standards of how we spend that money as all other public schools. We are subject to being audited by the Attorney General’s Office, we must conduct our own audit, we must competitively bid contracts, and we must adhere to all of the Sunshine laws as well as Right to Know laws. The demonization of our school based on the notion that taxpayer money is not accounted for in a transparent way is not just misleading, it is patently false. These misperceptions, and many others, do not only insult the nearly 800 employees and 11,500 students we have, but also insults the families who made the initial decision to leave their traditional school and enroll their child or children in our school. If the intent is to have a constructive dialogue about how best to reform the system to benefit all students, I would suggest it is imperative that we first start by eliminating these falsehoods and misperceptions.

I also believe it is critical that policy makers fully understand and recognize the difference between a cyber program and a cyber school. It is commonly stated that it costs a fraction of what we are reimbursed to educate a student, yet this statement ignores the fact that we are comprehensive public school. We have



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hundreds of full-time Pennsylvania certified union teachers, principals and other administrators, advisors, counselors, a business office, a large tech team, and others who support our students and their families, both in and out of the classroom. We have buildings in Midland to accommodate both our staff and students, regional offices and staff across the Commonwealth, extracurricular activities like Prom, yearbook, martial arts, field trips and dozens of other activities for our students. We provide each and every student with laptops, laptop cameras, printers and, when needed, internet connection. A review of our publicly available expenditures will show that these are costly items but one hundred percent worthy and necessary to provide a comprehensive school experience for our students. We believe there needs to be dialogue around reform about how charter schools are funded, and in fact, we took a proactive step two years ago in proposing a change, but any change needs to recognize that cyber programs and cyber schools are very different and have very different resource needs.

TRANSPARENT

PA Cyber supports all current proposals to ensure that charter schools operate under the highest standards of transparency and accountability, including conflict of interest requirements, requiring charter schools and their leaders to follow requirements of the State Ethics Commission, and prohibiting for profit management companies. It is important and worthy of note that most of us already do all of these requirements and more. There is very little in the current proposals would change the ways in which our board or staff currently operate, but by affirming these proposals I am hopeful that some of the public rhetoric about our operations being clandestine will cease.



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CANNOT TREAT OUR STUDENTS AS SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS

It is often said that a zip code should not determine whether or not a child receives a quality education, and throughout the pandemic, there has been an increased focus on equity in education. Part of the value of cyber charter schools is that we have overcome that challenge by ensuring that all our students have the same computers, printers, and internet reimbursements. In addition, we have our own technology team who that not only responds to student and staff questions but prepares and repairs hardware. All our students have access to the same teachers, curriculum, support systems, and extracurricular activities – regardless of where they live. In some respects, we have been able to overcome much of the inequity that exists amongst school districts. However, several issues remain where our students are not treated equally to their traditional public school, and I would submit to this committee that there is broad agreement that these inequities should be remedied. First, our students are unable to take dual enrollment courses unlike other public school students across the Commonwealth. Dual enrollment allows students to experience a college course, gain college credits, and ultimately save on tuition if they choose to pursue post-secondary education. Allowing our students to take classes that every other public school student does should be an easy reform with overwhelmingly positive outcomes that all parties can support, and I would urge the General Assembly to move legislation to fix this problem. Second, we ask for cooperation from the traditional public schools so that our students have universal access to SAT, ACT, and AP testing opportunities in their community.

As policy makers propose a standard statewide reimbursement rate to provide “equity”, this discussion should include equity in funding for all public schools, not just cyber schools. If policy makers can ensure that every traditional public school in Pennsylvania is funded equitably, then the issue of different cyber school



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reimbursements will disappear. Until that occurs, cyber families should receive the full benefit of the taxes that they pay to educate their kids. It is simply unfair to argue that a student attending a cyber school is worth less than if she or he stayed in the school district.

If we have learned anything over the past year, it is that students and their families are passionate about school. They have made their expectations clear and demanded that all of us do better. As we move to a post-pandemic world, it is important that we continue to assess what worked and what did not work. Cyber charter schools have much to offer in this process. We look forward to ways in which we can work together to make sure that all Pennsylvania public school students have the best pathways to success.

FAIR

This seems simple enough given we teach children the age-old adage of “fair is fair” and expect them to understand its applicability, yet we appear to get bogged down in the minutia when we discuss charter school reform, to the point where we consistently talk past one another in terms of fairness. PA Cyber is committed to raising the quality and respect of the dialogue on this matter, and we would welcome any interested party who commits to the same. Reform is needed and can be achieved working together through the lens of honesty, fairness, equity, and transparency.

Thank you again for allowing me to participate in today’s hearing, and I look forward to answering any questions you might have for me.