



**Pennsylvania House of Representatives Education Committee Public Hearing
Testimony on House Bill 1897**

Presented by

**The Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
January 21, 2020**

Good morning, Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Dr. Eric Eshbach, Superintendent of the Northern York County School District and Legislative Chair of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). I am here today representing PASA, whose members include school district superintendents, assistant superintendents, executive directors and other public school system leaders from across Pennsylvania. I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding House Bill 1897.

PASA supports House Bill 1897 as it creates fundamental changes to the laws regulating cyber learning programs that will provide opportunities for all students to participate in high-quality, full-time cyber learning programs that are accountable and transparent to taxpayers, families and students. While we realize this will be a significant change to the cyber learning industry in Pennsylvania, a change that will require school districts and current cyber charter schools to reorganize their cyber learning responsibilities and services, we believe it has the potential to be a positive change for students and families.

The bill requires all public school districts to offer a full-time cyber education program for their students. Many already offer a cyber learning option for their students. Over the past two decades, many school districts observed that some families prefer a cyber learning option to educate their children and were enrolling in cyber charter schools. In an effort to retain the children of these families in their school system, to ensure that these families benefitted from a high-quality, highly accountable program, and to do so in a cost-effective manner, many districts developed their own district-operated cyber learning option, or joined a consortium of other

school districts, often operated by an Intermediate Unit, to provide a cyber learning option for their students. Today, in keeping with the concept of local control upon which our Commonwealth effectively operates, many school districts across the state operate a full-time cyber learning option for their students that is accountable for all expenditures to the local taxpayers of their district, transparent in all its operations, and overseen by locally elected officials. Please understand that neither PASA nor a large majority of its members have ever been opposed to the concept of on-line or blended learning and, in fact, have utilized such methods to obtain and maintain the credentials required of all public school administrators. We have, however, continually questioned the accountability, transparency, and fiduciary responsibilities of the current laws guiding cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania.

PASA supports the concept that all school districts should offer a full-time cyber learning program but recognizes that some school districts may be financially challenged with the initial up-front cost to establish such a program. Although we believe the initial start-up cost of developing a cyber learning program will be offset by the savings realized when the program is operational, we recommend that the Department of Education and/or intermediate units provide assistance to help school districts establish a cyber learning program. Many school districts, intermediate units, and consortiums operate highly effective cyber learning programs that can serve as a model for districts beginning the process to establish a cyber learning program.

House Bill 1897 requires that all current cyber charter schools cease to exist as public schools, as full-time cyber learning options and choice of programs will be provided by the local school districts. We support this new paradigm, as it will bring greater accountability and efficiency to cyber learning options without sacrificing choice options for students. Families will be able to remain closely associated with the local school district by enrolling their children in the district-operated cyber learning program, or choose one of the two alternatives that will be operated by a third-party vendor

These third-party vendors must contract directly with school districts and adhere to fair market pricing in order to interest districts in contracting with them. PASA believes this will result in significant savings to school districts and taxpayers as most districts and consortiums operate their cyber learning programs at approximately half the cost of what is currently paid by districts for cyber charter school tuition.

Although the bill dissolves cyber charter schools as public school entities, it allows them to reorganize into third-party vendors to continue to operate and offer instructional services. A third-party vendor could also become a school district's choice to operate the local school district option for full-time cyber learning programming if the district did not want to establish a cyber learning program through its own resources and personnel. Therefore, all current cyber charter schools would have the opportunity to remain as viable cyber learning entities.

PASA asks that further consideration be given to allow Intermediate Units and public school consortiums be eligible to be third-party vendors as long as their programming is provided by a different content agency with different personnel than the local district option. Public schools should not be excluded from the entrepreneurial aspect of providing cyber learning options.

There are aspects of the bill that need further discussion and clarification. A more detailed explanation of district expectations in the contracting of two, third-party vendors to provide alternative cyber learning programs is needed. PASA recommends that districts receive sample contracts and requests for proposals with pertinent details to serve as a model for use in this process.

The bill requires a robust selection of course offerings in core subjects and electives for all cyber learning programs. A more detailed explanation of this requirement would be helpful to school districts to ensure they are meeting the expectation of the law. Course offerings in small, rural districts are dramatically different from those in large, suburban districts. Clarification on what constitutes robust course offerings is needed.

The bill also states that students must be provided all technology services necessary for online delivery of curriculum and instruction, or the reimbursement for such services. PASA is concerned that this may be a costly venture for some districts in remote areas of the state where internet services are difficult to secure. Provisions should be made to assist districts that encounter limited or no internet access to the homes of some students.

Finally, we believe that there is no one model of education that meets the needs of every child. For example, every day we see students who struggle with classes offered through a traditional model of lecturing and note-taking, only to excel in our career and technical schools in labs and shops in which their hands-on skills enable them to excel. Just as the traditional brick-and-mortar model of instruction is not suitable for all students, so too, the asynchronous or

blended model of instruction will not work for every student. We believe the Cyber Education Plan outlined in Section 1704-D should include a team-based approach to assessing the student's achievement in the on-line model. This team should include the student and his/her parents as well as instructors and administrators familiar with the courses and the student's performance. By doing so, we can ensure that all students, despite their level of engagement in cyber education, continue to grow academically, socially, and emotionally in a way that prepares them to succeed in our communities and in the global economy.

PASA applauds the requirement that all professional staff be properly certified to teach students as compared to the current charter school law that only requires 75% of instructors to be properly certified to teach students. However, House Bill 1897 sets student-to-teacher ratios. While we agree that student-teacher ratios should be as low as possible, we oppose setting fixed ratios in the law. The addition of just one student to a course during the school year could require the district to hire another teacher if the student-teacher ratio increased above the set limit established in the law. PASA recommends that student-to-teacher ratios be a local district decision.

Ultimately, House Bill 1897 provides for cyber learning programs for all students in Pennsylvania, continues to provide choice options for families, reduces cost to operate cyber learning options for school districts, and provides accountability and transparency to the public. PASA believes the concept of this bill and its framework are deserving of support and continued discussion to improve cyber education in the commonwealth.

I would be happy to answer your questions.

Thank you.