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**House Education Committee
Education Public Hearing
January 21, 2020**

**Submitted by: Dr. John Chandler, Chief Executive Officer, PA Virtual Charter School
On behalf of the Public Cyber Charter School Association (PCCSA)**

Good Morning,

Thank you Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck and members of the House Education Committee for allowing me to testify this morning.

I am John Chandler, the CEO of PA Virtual Charter School. I am here representing my school and the Public Cyber Charter School Association.

A little about PA Virtual. We serve approximately 2,100 students from almost 400 school districts.

We have over 210 staff located throughout Pennsylvania. One hundred percent (100%) are members of the PSERS retirement system.

Our teachers, who are awesome and with whom we have a great relationship, are union members affiliated with the PSEA.

Now, a little more about me. I served as a traditional public school teacher and principal, and I was a traditional public school superintendent for over 11 years. In 2016, I moved to Pennsylvania to become the CEO of PA Virtual.

While serving as a traditional public school superintendent, we started a district cyber program in 2011. A couple of years later we authorized a statewide cyber charter school. I oversaw both the district virtual program and the statewide virtual charter school. From my vantage point of overseeing both the district cyber program and the statewide cyber charter school, it was clear the statewide cyber charter school had better economies of scale, was focused solely on delivering cyber education, and was simply doing it better than we were in our district cyber program. So, we closed the district run cyber program.

I've been the CEO at PA Virtual for 3.5 years. I believe my experience in leading - and my strong support for - **all** forms of public education - both traditional and virtual - gives me a unique perspective.

I would like to address 5 topics today:

- Parent choice and our opposition to House Bill 1897



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- The erroneous figure of \$5,000 to educate a cyber student put forth by many educators and others.
- The need for a new, more fair funding model for ALL Pennsylvania students.
- What a quality cyber education looks like.
- Cyber charter school accountability.
- And I can do this all in the next 5 minutes.

As I previously stated, I've started and operated both a statewide cyber charter school and a district cyber program. Whether it is simply an unwillingness of traditional districts to offer quality cyber programs, an inability of traditional districts due to economies of scale to offer cyber programs that parents will willingly choose, or bad experiences with their local traditional school -- parents are not choosing their local district cyber programs and instead are choosing what they believe is best for their child. There are 37,000 children this year in independent statewide cyber charter schools -- because parents have choice and they choose cyber charter schools!

As a principal, later a superintendent, and now as CEO, I consistently remind staff that parents know better than we educators do in most cases what is best for their child. This is something I practice as well as preach. I believe most parents do what they believe is best for their child, and I believe having cyber charter schools independent of the traditional schools is what is needed to continue to provide necessary options for those who wish to exercise Parent Choice.

As House Bill 1897 would eliminate independently run statewide cyber charter schools from an already short list of publicly funded options for those wishing to exercise parent choice, I along with the other members of the Public Cyber Charter Association oppose House Bill 1897.

Regarding the cost to educate a cyber student, some state that a full-time cyber education can be delivered for around \$5,000 per student. I stand before you today disappointed in my education colleagues who have promoted that figure. I've worked in education most of my adult life and I believe the vast majority of people who work in education are some of the best people anywhere. However, the \$5,000 per student cost figure is either based on educational programming that is woefully inadequate or it is a figure that is blatantly erroneous.

For example, if a district has 950 students enrolled in their traditional program and 50 students in their virtual program, shouldn't 1/20 of the superintendent's salary, benefits, and office space be attributable to the cost of the virtual program? Shouldn't it be the same for a counselor or tech support and so on? I have strong reason to believe many of these costs are not being attributed to district run cyber programs, but they should be!

Please also see the article regarding the Quakertown School District realizing they were losing \$700,000 per year operating a cyber program. There are a lot of public school officials who



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simply do not realize what a cyber program costs -- yet they are promoting an egregiously erroneous figure that is based on fiction and use of this figure simply must stop!

Offering quality, full-time cyber education opportunities is not cheap. At PA Virtual, we offer the following:

- High quality HP computer and printer/scanner
- Internet reimbursement
- Robust online curriculum with additional hard copy materials
- Comprehensive orientation for new families staffed by certified teachers
- Ongoing student and parent support, engagement, and education opportunities
- Guidance Counselors and School Nurses
- Family Support Coordinators - who help with everything from attendance, home visits, and troubleshooting, and who also provide outings for families
- Fully staffed tech support from 6 am - 10 pm.
- After school tutoring
- Full continuum of special education services - meaning we actively enroll special education students and do not discriminate in our enrollment practices
- A low (18:1) student-to-teacher ratio, where teachers are paid union wages, and all our staff are in the PSERS retirement program.

Regarding accountability, cyber charter schools are held accountable as evidenced by the over 150 required reports we submit each year. You have been provided with a list of these 150 reports.

We are also accountable to parents who can vote with their feet. Traditional school districts are also accountable to parents who vote with their feet. School districts lose a level of accountability if independent cyber charter schools do not remain a viable option.

Regarding funding of cyber charter students, the tuition paid from a traditional school district on behalf of a cyber charter student is not solely local district money. We all know that a traditional school district is funded by a mix of local tax dollars, state funds, and federal funds. Therefore, I ask my traditional education colleagues to stop calling it "their" money - it is public school funding meant to fund a public school student. Having said this, please know the Public Cyber Charter School Association is supportive of reviewing the way public education is funded in Pennsylvania in order to develop a more fair funding formula for ALL students in Pennsylvania.

I would like to again thank you for this opportunity today and also say that we stand ready - and would appreciate the opportunity - to work with both Chairmen, the members of the House Education Committee, and anyone else who supports improving educational opportunities for all public school students in the Commonwealth.