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Pennsylvania House Education Committee  
Public Hearing: Safely Reopening Schools in the Fall  
August 4, 2020

Testimony by Richard Jensen, Ed.D, Agora Cyber Charter School  
Representing Public Cyber Charter School Association

Thank you Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, and Honorable Members of the House Education Committee. On behalf of the Pennsylvania Public Cyber Charter School Association (PCCSA) in general, and Agora Cyber Charter School in particular, I am grateful for the opportunity to address this Committee regarding safely reopening our schools in the fall of 2020.

PCCSA represents a select group of Pennsylvania's public cyber charter schools who are dedicated to collaboration and sharing best practices in online education with the larger public school community. As a group, PCCSA educates over 10,500 of Pennsylvania's public school students from nearly every county.

As was shared in written testimony presented to the House Education Committee on June 17, 2020 Pennsylvania's Public Cyber Charter School Association (PCCSA) is committed to providing each of our students with a safe, supportive, and high quality cyber educational experience from the very first day of the 2020-2021 school year to ensure all students have equal and equitable access to all supports and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic that still remains a societal and health concern.

The educational service that the schools of the PCCSA provided before the pandemic began, during the time of school closure (March 13 through the end of the 2019-2020 school year), and as it appears in our reopening plans for the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, demonstrates a remarkable consistency and continuity of educational and support services for students and their families. The PCCSA has a combined 20 years of experience in the virtual learning model and Agora Cyber Charter School has operated uninterrupted for the past 15 years. Therefore, we are confident that the dedication and commitment of our faculty and staff is prepared to support every one of our students.

Nearly every school in the Commonwealth was impacted this past Spring by the upheaval that resulted from the school closure associated with COVID-19. Yet, PCCSA's member schools and their students did not miss a day. In particular, when the school closure announcement was made by Governor Wolf on March 13, Agora conducted two days of asynchronous learning, as we prepared to support our staff for new realities they were facing as well, before we resumed synchronous class sessions for all courses across all disciplines and all grade bands. When Secretary Rivera issued an order under Act 13 of 2020 that all schools were to remain closed for the remainder of the school year, cyber charter schools had already resumed classes and educational services for several weeks.

When it was then announced from the Department of Education on March 24 that all schools were to provide a continuity of education plan, which could include either a planned course of instruction or enrichment and review, the member schools of PCCSA already were already fully functioning under planned courses of instruction the very much resembled the type of services we were able to provide before the pandemic. As requested by PDE, all the member schools of PCCSA submitted their Continuity of Education plans to the Department with Agora submitting their Continuity of Education Plan on April 3. These plans demonstrated our commitment to consistent instruction, including synchronous live sessions, that met the Department of Education's guidelines and the expectations of our families.

Furthermore, during this time when we knew it was very challenging for our colleagues in brick-and-mortar schools to make such abrupt and drastic changes in their model, PCCSA member schools sought out opportunities to collaborate with our colleagues in brick and mortar schools to share best practices in online education to ensure no student's educational opportunities would be impeded.

Despite the school closure notification on March 13th, and the provision in Act 13 of 2020 that stated districts would not need to provide funding for any student who enrolled after March 13, as public schools we were still responsible to enroll students. For this reason, PCCSA member schools felt a moral responsibility and imperative to continue to enroll students despite not being reimbursed for the students we educated. For many schools, this was a significant financial commitment. In particular, the loss of revenue for new students enrolled during the 12 weeks of school closure was a commitment that cost Agora Cyber Charter school a little over \$1 million in lost funding.

As schools plan to resume school activities, it is the collective goal to diminish the opportunity for coronavirus to spread. It is a top priority and the commitment of each school to ensure the health and safety of all students, families, staff and independent contractors. Based upon this commitment and

following the guidance of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, each PCCSA member school has created a Health and Safety Plan that will guide both instructional and non-instructional school activities.

Each respective Health and Safety Plan is tailored specifically to the individual school, consistent with the expectations of the families they serve, and informed by each school's unique mission and charter. The Health and Safety Plans include an emphasis on professional learning and promote transparent communications with families, faculty and staff. Following the approval of each school's governing board, the Health and Safety plans were made public through each school's respective website. For example, the Board of Trustees for Agora Cyber Charter School approved the Health and Safety Plan on July 13 and it was posted to the school website on July 15.

In general, as a cyber charter schools, daily operational procedures for instruction and support of students provided by teachers, specialists, and other staff already are provided through online, web-conferencing, and other electronic means. Therefore, we are positioned to still provide high quality live class instruction and a multi-tiered system of supports and interventions. The two areas that will most impact the member schools of PCCSA in our phased reopening plans is the health and safety of staff in our offices and buildings and staff, contracted related service providers, students and families for students in need of special education services which are most feasible to provide in person.

Each PCCSA member school has taken steps to ensure the sanitization of all school buildings consistent with CDC recommended guidelines. These efforts remain ongoing. In addition, essential staff who must utilize the school facilities in order to maintain vital school activities have been identified and properly trained on all safety procedures and precautions. Essential employees have also been provided with recommended personal protective equipment including protective masks, hand washing stations, disinfecting wipes, and hand sanitizer. As the summer progresses, we will continue to evaluate the necessity of bringing additional faculty and staff within the school buildings as well as evaluate additional protective measures that could be explored including maintaining social distancing guidelines, strategic work spaces, and physical barrier separations. It is our goal that as we move toward the fall, we will have evidence and best practice guidelines for ensuring the safe resumption of any face to face student activities within our facilities. To illustrate, essential staff, such as those in executive leadership, finance and human resources that may need access files or equipment needed to perform certain functions have resumed work in the central office located in King of Prussia, however the decision was made to not have other office staff return for the foreseeable future.

Providing related services to our special education population will continue to present challenges throughout the school year. While the vast majority of special education services may be able to be provided within the online learning environment, this is a decision that needs to be made by the IEP team. When it is determined that in-person services are needed, accommodations for such students, such as mask wearing, should be made in partnership with the student's health care provider, school nurse, and IEP/504 team. Additionally, specific evaluation services require a more consistent and structured environment in order to ensure the fidelity of the assessment. The health and safety plans of each school address methods to protect the health and safety of students, staff, and contracted service providers.

Thank you again, Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, and the Honorable members of the House Education Committee for the opportunity to submit this testimony regarding the safe reopening of our schools in the fall.

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