



**PA House Education Committee – Subcommittee on Special Education  
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Testimony of Ashley Pullum, M.S.Ed, BCBA, LBA  
Director of Special Education  
Memphis Street Academy Charter School

My name is Ashley Pullum, Director of Special Education for Memphis Street Academy Charter School located in Philadelphia. Thank you to the honorable members of this subcommittee for inviting Philadelphia Charters for Excellence (PCE), of which Memphis Street is a member, to testify this morning and provide some insight into how Philadelphia’s public brick-and-mortar charter schools are serving students with special education needs.

As an educator within an urban school, I experience several challenges that create hurdles in educating children with disabilities—Memphis Street has a very diverse population in an underserved community. Many of our students enter our school well below grade level and with limited English language proficiency, which impedes their ability to meet grade-level standards and requires a significant lift on the part of the educator to support their unique needs. With 22 percent of our school population receiving special education services, students frequently enroll at Memphis Street with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) from their previous placement. However, we also have parents who request a special education evaluation for their children upon enrolling in our school because their request for this testing has gone unanswered

by their student's previous school. This delay in identifying students with disabilities increases the achievement gap because students have gone without the necessary supports and can discourage a student's love of learning.

In addition to academic performance and language proficiency, our scholars struggle to meet their basic needs. Unfortunately, they are born and raised in a high-crime and impoverished community that impedes and, in some instances, attempts to stunt their development. However, as educators, we are their haven and we must provide them an opportunity to break generational curses, but this responsibility requires a lot of the school and its educators. As special education teachers, we coordinate with English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and assigned classroom teachers to ensure our accommodations and modifications to the curriculum is more assessable yet remains rigorous.

Additionally, at Memphis Street we provide testing in our students' native language to ensure they are not over-identified (there are instances where students are mistakenly identified as needing special education when the issue is simply a language barrier) and coordinate with ESL staff within our schools to support translating meetings and written communication with parents—this all before actually providing classroom instruction. We have to become increasingly creative to bridge the gap between various skill deficits and grade-level standards in the classroom. That includes purchasing, receiving training, and coordinating small group instruction of all scholars who require research-based interventions. Additionally, due to the COVID-19

pandemic, we coordinate COVID-compensatory services for scholars and increase small group and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) processes for the general education population.

The pandemic has created a significant mental crisis amongst our scholars, especially those with pre-existing diagnoses. These scholars typically receive counseling during the school day and medication and therapeutic services outside the educational setting. However, many scholars could not receive updated medication prescriptions, and therapeutic services were converted to Telehealth due to the pandemic. Moreover, many of our scholars come from complex living situations, and school typically serves as a break or haven from the realities of their home lives. At times it's difficult for parents to participate in IEP meetings which creates issues with IEP compliance timelines and making appropriate adjustments to the IEP. As a result, many scholars have returned to us angry and struggle to cope with the transition back to school. The lack of coping skills interferes with the child's ability to focus in school because their basic needs and mental health take center stage. As a result, Memphis Street Academy Charter School provides a food pantry and partners with a local mental health agency. Additionally, we built in Caring School Community time and added several after-school programs to support our scholars in their transition back to a new normal.

All of these outside factors are happening at the same time that educators are trying to provide a high-quality education to their students. This level of pressure requires educators to receive additional training about the emotional needs of the scholar and create a structured yet welcoming classroom environment. We've experienced the same mass resignation during the

pandemic that schools across the country have seen, which has cost us valuable and experienced educators and support staff.

The pandemic created a new crisis for public charter schools operating in Philadelphia in how our students are transported to and from our schools. As is the case for most brick-and-mortar charter schools in PA, we rely on our local school district to transport our students but a lack of school bus drivers plagues our city, and our students are significantly impacted. It takes weeks for our provider to place children on a bus. We often have to remind the school bus drivers which scholars to pick up and where. This ongoing concern interferes with our scholars' ability to arrive at school on time and receive the much-needed instruction. This is even more concerning/dangerous for our special education students who rely on consistency and predictability in their daily routines.

Despite the barriers and challenges we experience as educators at Memphis Street Academy Charter School, we continue to put students first and use our resources to increase student performance and, more importantly, provide them with life-long coping skills.

Thank you again for providing me with an opportunity to speak with you this morning, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have. I also invite you all to visit Memphis Street Academy Charter School and see the fantastic work we are doing.