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Appropriations and Education Committee Joint Public Hearing on School Funding

Good afternoon, Chair Harris, Representative Ciresi, and honorable members of the Appropriations and Education Committees

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Committees to discuss crucial recommendations for improving and correcting Pennsylvania's educational system. As our state strives for excellence in education, policymakers must prioritize actions and implement policies that support charter schools and expand *all* school choice options for Pennsylvania students. The recommendations I share with you today are rooted in the belief that a diversified and innovative education landscape is key to meeting Pennsylvania's students' diverse needs. Furthermore, I share what I have seen in my core experiences as an educator and student with varied and diverse learning experiences.

I come to this issue as a leader in what many would call a 'high achieving' school. My staff and students have demonstrated consistent achievement, a proud record of 100% high school graduation, and a formidable college placement rate. This past year, the US News and World Report ranked our high school 16th among the 500+ Public High Schools in the Commonwealth. We are proud of these achievements, yet with all public school colleagues, we face challenges of increasing expenses and the demand to serve a more academically and socially needy population than we have ever experienced.

These factors add to the growing strain on our schools, educators, and the system we are here to discuss today. As a charter leader, there are several key areas in which improvement is needed if we wish to sustain our schools and the staff who pour their time and energy into them daily.

1. Increase Funding Equity for Charter Schools:

Nationally, charter schools play a vital role in fostering innovation and providing families with choices for their children's education. PA has allowed this innovative and progressive model to take root and grow for nearly twenty-five years, yet more needs to be done to create a fair and equitable method of funding these schools. Just over one year ago, the Commonwealth Supreme Court declared that the funding of education in PA was unconstitutional, with the greatest inequality in communities and schools where our most needy students reside. Charters have done some of their greatest work in these urban and rural areas, yet they remain even more unequally funded than traditional schools.

Operations at a charter rely on approximately 75% of traditional public schools' funding expenditure per pupil spending and are based on rates almost 18 months behind inflation of costs. However, our charters are expected to provide the same level of support, adequate staffing, and required safety measures on this "¾ budget." Basic expenses and legally mandated costs, such as employee retirement, are not decreased by 75%. This method of budget allocation is flawed and unequal for our students.

Our responsibility is to level the educational playing field; addressing funding disparities between traditional public and charter schools is crucial. School leaders, such as myself, work daily to provide a high-quality education to all of our students regardless of where they live in our state. Policymakers should explore ways to equitably distribute resources, such as implementing a fair funding formula that considers the unique needs of each student, regardless of the school they choose to attend.

2. Streamline the Charter School Authorization Process:

A streamlined and efficient charter school authorization process is essential for encouraging high-quality charter schools' establishment, growth, and continued success. Policymakers must work towards creating a transparent and expedited approval process, ensuring that well-qualified charter operators can establish schools that meet the educational needs of local communities. This can involve reviewing and revising current regulations to eliminate unnecessary barriers while maintaining rigorous academic performance and fiscal responsibility standards.

Along with the Authorization process comes the arbitrary re-authorization process. In my experience, I have had the good fortune of working with a reasonable and amicable authorizer relationship. Notwithstanding this circumstance, I am faced every five years with new metrics, questions, and requests for information that have not been communicated. This results in multiple central office staff at the district and my limited staff at our school creating and collating information that likely has already been provided to PDE through countless reports, audits, Charter Annual Reports, and ACS collections and snapshots many times during the school year. This redundancy is steeped in red tape and takes resources away from students.

A standardized approach and process for the above would streamline efforts across all districts and charters, thus reducing wasted resources across the state. It would allow accountability, transparency, and consistency among charter school boards and operators. Additionally, creating a procedure of agreed-upon standards would allow you, our policy-makers, to better evaluate the success and merits of continued authorizations.

3. Invest in Professional Development & Certification for Educators:

To maintain high standards in both traditional public schools and charter schools, investing in long-range professional development for educators is essential. The current climate at many schools does not foster a welcoming or willing workforce for teachers and necessary school staff members. At many traditional public schools and charter schools, staff feel undervalued simply due to the lack of respect and compensation they are provided.

The needs of students at many schools, including my own Charter School, have grown exponentially due to the trauma and experiences of the pandemic. I have seen this across all 24+ districts where my students travel. While my staff works unceasingly to evaluate and accommodate those needs, we are often faced with staff who are inexperienced and, even with their best efforts, lack the knowledge to provide for every child. As the population of high-needs students grows, we bolster our staff to provide on-demand training. Lack of time and attention to this hugely important profession simply does not align with the needs of our most vulnerable and precious resource: our children.

The Teacher Preparation programs developed by PDE to fill vacancies and fast-track teachers into classrooms lack fidelity and long-term support. While perhaps well-intended, these 'emergency' response certifications push teachers into classrooms without the necessary tools or support. This irresponsible behavior creates a cycle of apathy among educators, leading to high turnover in many schools when student learning loss is high, and consistency is crucial.

Policymakers must allocate resources for ongoing training opportunities, provide funds and incentives for schools to build robust mentoring programs, and ensure that teachers and administrators have the skills and knowledge needed to excel in a more demanding-than-ever educational landscape. This need cannot be left to chance but must be planned for and monitored. Models for a highly respected, well-compensated teacher workforce do exist and are applauded in other countries. They are often pointed toward during our PDE training and IU workshops, yet the budget allocations to mimic these programs cannot be found.

To close, I ask you to consider the many opinions and suggestions you have heard and will hear today. Hear the voices of myself and my colleagues who wish to provide the very best, HIGH-QUALITY educational experience to our students. Our willingness to work hard cannot be questioned, and our ability to creatively solve problems can not be denied - But we need you. We need you to prioritize funding equity, streamline the cumbersome re-authorization processes, and invest time and resources in professional development. Pennsylvania can build a robust and responsive education system that meets the diverse needs of our students. I urge the Appropriations Committee to consider these recommendations seriously as you work towards shaping policies that will positively and permanently impact the future of education and our students.