

Tomea A. Sippio-Smith
Education Policy Director
Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY)
990 Spring Garden Street, Suite 200
Philadelphia, PA 19123

CHARTER SCHOOL HEARING TESTIMONY
Senate Education Policy Committee Hearing
October 22, 2019

When the Pennsylvania legislature passed the charter school law in 1997 and amended it in 2002 to include cyber charters, many believed the combination of autonomy, flexibility and accountability of the schools would lead to innovative and better results for students.

For far too many students, that has not been the case.

For example - on the PA Department of Education's prior metric to gage performance based on student exam scores, graduation and promotion rates and attendance, in 2016, only 24% of the 161 brick and mortar charter schools earned a "passing score." None of the cyber charter schools did.

A look at student scores in 2016 reveals that 58% of charter school students in 3rd through 8th grade had not mastered grade level reading skills; 79% were not on grade level in math. For cyber charter students, that number jumped to 61% of students failing reading; more than 85% of students did not pass math.

These are clearly not the outcomes anyone envisioned for students when the charter school law was passed.

Instead of supporting the growth of autonomous high-quality options for students, Pennsylvania's law has contributed to its stagnation.

Given the consistently poor performance of cyber charter schools and the students who attend them, a change in the cyber charter law is necessary to support the growth of higher quality charter school options students deserve.

I'm here today to share suggestions on how changes to the state cyber charter laws can provide more parents, students and families with access to the high-quality choices the charter school law originally envisioned. These changes can:

1. Protect taxpayer interests

In 2016, school districts paid approximately \$1.5 billion dollars in charter school payments. About \$500 million went to cyber charter schools.

Moreover, during the same period, roughly 2015 – 2017, cyber charter school students performed far worse than their peers attending traditional public schools and brick and mortar schools. Cyber charter students performed as if they had nearly a year less learning in reading and year less learning in math than students in traditional public schools and brick and mortar schools.

A fiscally sound law would address: (1) payment generally and (2) standardize wildly varying rates school districts are paying for the same product.

You can change the law to ensure that cyber charter schools receive payments that are better aligned with the cost of educating students.

2. Promote the use of a fiscally responsible formula that considers the actual needs of special education students

The special education funding formula was adopted and became law. The formula allocated state funding to school districts based on student needs and district factors. The formula should be applied to cyber charter school students to better align payment with the actual level of need a student receiving special education services has.

3. Provide cyber charter operators with fair and consistent rules and processes

Standardize the process for amendments, renewals, revocations, appeals and new applications. The rules should be clearly stated in the law for the authorizer and cyber charter schools.

4. Keep bad actors out

Charter school operators and leadership with a history of significant academic gains and strong performance for students, fiscal stability, a sound organizational structure, and backgrounds free from criminal activity should be allowed to open schools.

5. Incentivize strong performance and fiscal responsibility

Although no cyber charter schools currently meet this standard, cyber charter schools that post high scores and gains for students, that are fiscally solvent and organizationally sound should be allowed to expand and receive longer charter terms.

6. Raise the level of quality seats available to students

If a cyber charter schools posts consistently poor results, after three years, the school should be shut down. These seats can be given to high performing schools. Overtime, as chronically poor performers dwindle, more students will have access to high quality seats.

7. Make the closure process less difficult for parents and students

If a cyber charter school is closing, require the school to provide parents and students with enough time to research other school options and meet application deadlines for other schools.

8. Focus on finding solutions

Implement a moratorium on the opening of new cyber charter schools while working on solutions. In Pennsylvania and across the country, cyber charter schools are posting abysmal performance. Pennsylvania has a unique opportunity to work on its existing schools and find solutions to existing problems. If it takes time to course-correct, it can serve as a national leader in cyber charter policy reform.

Pennsylvania's charter school is largely known as "worst" charter law in the country *and* has been consistently poorly rated by organizations that favor charter school options for students.

Other states have adopted or amended their laws to improve the overall quality of charter schools. In fact, between 2012 and 2017, 23 states did. Pennsylvania did not.

Senate education committee members, it doesn't have to be this way. Although many of you were not here when the law was passed, you have the power to change it.

The cyber charter law is ripe for review and overdue for an overhaul.

And while my focus today was on improving the cyber charter law because it clearly the most pressing issue, there's clearly more room for reform in the bricks and mortar charters.

But nothing will change for Pennsylvania's cyber charter school students, families or taxpayers if we fail to act yet again. We have the power as a state to be a cyber charter law reform leader by fixing a law that we know doesn't work, produces consistently poor outcomes for our students and needs to be updated.

You can change the law to create a charter school sector that balances fiscal and organizational accountability with the innovation and autonomy that was originally envisioned. You can rewrite the law to support the creation of more high-quality choice options for student.

The power to bring this antiquated law into the 21st century so that PA's students are prepared for this century's demands rests with you. I urge you to take the action that supports higher quality choices for students and their families.