

Testimony of Scott Gordon
CEO-Mastery Schools Network
On behalf of Public Charters for Academic Excellence
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Education and Health and Human Services Committees
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Public Charters for Academic Excellence

Public Charters for Academic Excellence is a group of three public charter schools, Propel Schools, Mastery Schools Network and KIPP Philadelphia Schools. These charter school systems are committed to furthering the efficient, effective, and equitable role of public charter schools in the education of Pennsylvania's youth. Together these three schools educate approximately 25% of all brick-and-mortar public charter school students in Pennsylvania pre-COVID-19 pandemic. Each is a multi-building school system.

Demographic and other important information relating to these schools is contained in the addendum to this testimony. Propel, Mastery and KIPP thank Senate Education Committee Chairs Martin and Williams as well as Senate Health and Human Services Chairs Brooks and Haywood for the opportunity to present this testimony regarding Education during the COVID-19 pandemic and the future.

Introduction

To state the obvious, the COVID-19 pandemic has largely disrupted basic education since March 2020. Despite the collective and good faith efforts of all in public education to respond to this unprecedented crisis, Pennsylvania's student achievement will not meet normal progression. Vital information has been gained in the past year and best practices need to be implemented as the Commonwealth's schools transition from virtual to hybrid or from hybrid to full in-person education.

This testimony will review the COVID-19 response mounted by each charter school system since March 2020; will detail their steps toward full in-person education; and will make recommendations that should be implemented statewide.

Understanding Charter Schools

Born of the school choice movement nearly 25 years ago, Pennsylvania first authorized public charter schools in 1997. Currently, 157 brick and mortar charter schools, 14 cyber charter schools and 10 regional charter schools operate in the Commonwealth. Generally, community inspired and created, brick and mortar public charter schools (including regional charter schools) are authorized by a traditional public school district and may receive students from any "sending school district". Cyber charter schools are authorized by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and may receive students from a variety of traditional school districts. Charter schools and cyber charter schools must be organized as public, nonprofit corporations. A limited number have for-profit entities that manage their operations, a practice that is similar to non-profit corporations in other fields. By and large, brick and mortar public charter schools receive funding from their sending districts based upon a statutory funding formula, which requires tuition rates for both regular and special education students. In some cases, this equates to the sending districts per pupil spending. They also receive revenue from their own educational foundations and other community charitable support.

Propel, Mastery and KIPP are top performing public charter schools serving students in Allegheny County (Propel), Philadelphia (Mastery and KIPP). The three schools' student assessment generally outperforms their sending districts and land above statewide rankings. With this background in mind, we will review the past year and look toward the future.

Part I. Public Education During COVID-19 – March 2020 to Present

The past 12 months have been extremely challenging for students, their families and the public charter schools that serve both. Propel, Mastery and KIPP aggressively met the pandemic's early threats to student wellbeing and achievement. As COVID-19's grip begins to loosen this spring and summer, our schools will continue our student first stance on meeting our academic missions. The following are measures each school implemented early last year and how each prepared for reopening.

Student and Family Supports

Shift to Virtual Learning

Pursuant to state guidance and mandates, Propel, Mastery and KIPP quickly shifted to virtual learning in the spring of 2020. To facilitate this effort, all three schools purchased and distributed to their students and families computers or tablets along with the necessary hardware and software to operate the same. They also worked closely with local and regional internet providers to ensure the necessary student connectivity for virtual learning to occur.

Equipment and connectivity, however, were not enough to safeguard student education. All three schools embarked upon aggressive professional development strategies to raise teacher proficiency in virtual learning and to increase their comfort in this new teaching method. To create the sense of normality for students in an abnormal situation, most educators virtually taught lessons from their classrooms.

With these elements in place, Propel, Mastery and KIPP quickly and successfully transitioned to virtual learning. Before the close of 2020 and in compliance with federal and state guidance, Propel Schools were able to move beyond virtual learning to a hybrid model.

Student/Family Wellbeing –

In addition to preparing our students for virtual learning through the provision of equipment and preparing our staff, Propel, Mastery and KIPP continued to care for our students' and families' wellbeing. Our meal programs did not end when in-person instruction was halted. Our wellness programs, providing clothing, medical care, mental health services and other necessities, expanded

given the pandemic's adverse effects on normal life as evidenced by sustained job losses, strained finances, growing food insecurity and compromised basic and higher education.

To advance our students' educational needs, we were compelled to provide for their general wellbeing. We provided these wellness services through charitable contributions, foundation support, community partners and donations from the public. We thank all who supported and continue to support our wellness efforts.

Adherence to Guidance

Throughout the past year, our three school systems adhered to the various published guidance regarding whether and how to provide in-person, virtual or hybrid instruction. The challenge, at times, was to determine which guidance to follow. The World Health Organization (WHO), the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PADOH) and local health departments all issued educational and social distancing guidance, but not all were precisely consistent.

A prime example is the social distancing recommendations from WHO (three feet) and CDC (six feet). The obvious default for Pennsylvania schools is the CDC distancing guidance. Last week, however, Chester County's Health Department authorized the 3 feet social distancing regime as long as infection rates remain low. Downingtown, West Chester, and Garnet Valley School Districts are implementing the three feet model in response as they re-open in March and April. Bucks County Health Department issued a similar guidance last June. Yet, PDE still maintains the six feet social distancing recommendation. This type of governance and guidance inconsistency makes it difficult at best for charter schools to determine the best path forward. It also adds to the growing student achievement gap statewide. This issue will be further discussed in this testimony's forward-looking section.

Building Preparation

Propel, Mastery and KIPP also met the building preparation challenge by inspecting, updating, and repairing ventilation systems as necessary, increasing fan and filter capacities, and investing in cleaning supplies and methods. In every building, our schools met or exceeded local and state standards to ensure student and staff health and safety.

Results

While specific assessment data is not available, Propel, Mastery and KIPP anticipate a loss of student attainment over the past year. The three schools project a three-month achievement setback. Mastery and KIPP has used a largely virtual model while Propel implemented hybrid instruction.

From a COVID-19 infection viewpoint, our schools' results are consistent with our preparation methods and our instructional models. Propel's infection history is very enlightening given their hybrid instruction model and extraordinary preparation methods for students, staff, and buildings. Propel reports:

- 77 overall reported COVID-19 cases
- 19 student/scholars out of 4,000
- 58 staff members out of 658
- 39 reported cases occurred while Propel was in their virtual model.

We believe Propel's experience demonstrates that with proper planning and preparation of students, staff, and buildings, in-person instruction can be safe and effective.

Part II. Public Education During COVID-19 – March 2021 and Beyond

One Size Fits all vs Complete Local Option – The Guidance Conundrum

No one believes a one size fits all schools approach is appropriate in an unprecedented crisis. Complete local option, however, is equally inadequate to ensure student achievement and academic progression. For students and the schools serving them to successfully advance through this pandemic, we need more consistent and coordinated guidance from PDE, PADOH, local health departments and local school districts.

As previously noted in this testimony, social distancing guidance for charter schools and traditional school districts can vary simply based upon whether the county in which they are located has its own health department. The timeframe during which a school building needs to be closed following a student or staff positive test can vary across counties and the state as well.

Local control can be positive in many respects, but this inconsistency can directly lead to achievement gaps among students simply based upon zip code. And as we clearly know, zip code can be a default setting for race and economic status. We believe that state agencies, PDE and PADOH in particular, should provide more clear and comprehensive guidance on basic health and safety issues such as social distancing and school closures.

Brick and Mortar vs Cyber Charter School Education

If COVID-19 demonstrated one thing to policymakers, it is that virtual learning works well for some, but not all students. Professional educators did not need a global pandemic to understand this lesson. We know that most students, particularly those Propel, Mastery and KIPP serve, thrive in an enriching, in-person school environment.

Propel, Mastery and KIPP students are some of the most difficult to educate for a variety of socio-economic factors. In many cases, traditional public schools failed these students, but our charter schools have not. Mastery's experience in Philadelphia, turning around 12 school buildings at the District's request, is clear evidence that all students can be successfully educated in the proper environment and with the appropriate methods.

Our schools' pre-pandemic assessments, graduation rates and other performance measures reveal attainment near or above our sending schools' results and on par with statewide averages. Propel, Mastery and KIPP also serve Special Education populations at or above the statewide traditional school district percentage. To fully serve our students and to provide the educational services they deserve and need, we are diligently working toward full in-person instruction as quickly as possible. Please see this testimony's Addendum to review demographic and attainment metrics.

We also know that the virtual education model is not a good, long-term strategy for our students. Over the past 12 months, all three schools experienced higher absenteeism and truancy. This is true even for Propel who implemented a hybrid model for much of 2020 and 2021. In addition, household challenges, such as multiple students in the same home as well as a lack of quiet space and other learning supports, has vexed all Pennsylvania students, but has been acute for our students. Virtual learning has been necessary during the pandemic, but we need to quickly return to full, in-person instruction.

In March of 2020, it is true that cyber charter schools were ahead of brick-and-mortar charters and traditional school districts in terms of virtual instruction, but we quickly caught up and implemented successful programs. Cyber charter schools' initial online advantage evaporated within a short time span and no longer existed at the 2020 – 2021 school year's start. Unlike cyber charter schools, Propel, Mastery and KIPP maintained food and other wellness services, provided in-person special education instruction (either in home or in school) and met other necessary student needs throughout the pandemic. We continue to serve students in ways that cyber charter schools cannot and do not. Cyber charter schools have an important role in the educational continuum, but virtual or online instruction cannot and will not replace high quality in-person instruction.

Pandemic should not be excuse for excessive regulation/funding cuts.

In his budget address and last week, Governor Tom Wolf called for sweeping changes to charter school regulation and funding. After 25 years' experience with charter schools, the Commonwealth is probably due for a review of charter school best practices, governance, and funding. Propel, Mastery and KIPP believe that the COVID-19 pandemic, however, should not be an excuse for significant funding cuts and excessive regulation in the compressed timeframe required to enact the Fiscal Year 2021 – 2022 state budget.

Last session, HB 355 contained many reasonable charter school reforms that our three schools supported. We are sorry Representative Mike Reese is not with us this session to champion this important legislation again. His bill provides a roadmap for others to follow this session.

Propel, Mastery and KIPP are pleased that Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman and Education Committee Chair Scott Martin have picked up the mantle and are crafting significant reforms that build upon Representative Reese's HB 355. Our schools are looking forward to working with the Senate as SB 1 continues to be developed. A thoughtful and careful process is vital to ensure that charter school students and families continue to be served in a high-quality manner. It is also necessary to reduce barriers to top-flight instruction while maintaining adequate governance accountability. Balance is required and can be achieved with stakeholders' input. We thank Senators Corman and Martin for their leaders and for including our schools in this process.

In addition, ensuring special education funding equity among charter schools and traditional school districts is not achieved simply by applying a special education funding formula to charter schools to determine a tuition rate. Please be assured that Governor Wolf's special education funding proposal will result in a significant cut in funding for brick-and-mortar charter schools. We look forward to further explaining this important issue to the General Assembly as the budget process unfolds.

Conclusion

Propel, Mastery and KIPP Charter Schools thank the Senate Education Committee Chairs, the Senate Health and Human Services Chairs and both Committees' members for this opportunity to comment on education during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are pleased to be a multi-building charter school resource for you and we look forward to further working with the committees this session.