

Senate Education Committee
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Testimony of Patricia Rossetti, CEO
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Good morning Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams and Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Patricia Rossetti and I am the CEO at Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School. I also serve on the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools' (PCPCS) Advisory Council. Thank you for the opportunity to share reflections regarding the education of Pennsylvania's children this past year during the COVID-19 pandemic. While many describe this past year as challenging and unprecedented, those words cannot define us, nor do they negate our responsibilities to educate children. We must come together as K-12 educators to collaborate, communicate and build strong community connections to ensure children feel safe and have a learning space to grow. Our school community has chosen to look at the past year as one of unforeseen opportunities that allowed us to learn and grow for the betterment of public education for all children. We must focus on what we can do, not what we cannot do.

My team at Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School became aware of COVID-19 in January 2020. Our school model at the time was at-home online learning for our 837 students with a full-time, in-office working environment for our 99 staff members. Behind the scenes, we made the necessary technical changes to put a plan in place that allowed staff to work from home until the virus was mitigated. We were fortunate that, unlike other schools with no time to implement plans of support, following Governor Wolf's announcement that schools would be closed our preparations were ready to deploy. While PA's public cyber charter schools were uniquely positioned to respond during the pandemic, our schools were not immune from the hardships and challenges that the last year has presented. While our students had the materials in place to continue learning online, our staff needed time to set-up at home office spaces and develop new schedules as many would be caring for their own children.

I could not be prouder of our school community from our students, parents, Student Services team, school counselors, teachers, administration, as well as our school partners in technology, business services, and related services. Everyone worked tirelessly, communicated often, and collaborated to adjust to our new normal, all while continuing to prioritize supporting our students and school families.

Not only did our staff continue to plan for the education of our students but we, along with many of my public cyber charter school colleagues, began to assist brick-and-mortar schools with their



own online learning initiatives. Our Instructional Technology Coaches and administrators partnered with the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (PCPCS) to hold training sessions for every school on Google Classroom and Curriculum Resources in March 2020. The resources shared in that first training, along with many others held by PCPCS and Pennsylvania's public cyber charter schools have been used across Pennsylvania and in other states. Feedback from the schools that collaborated with our school on a one-on-one basis has been tremendous as they have successfully moved from a fully in-person educational model to hybrid and full-time online models as circumstances dictated throughout the 2019-20 and the current school year.

Our current enrollment is 1,406 students with 124 staff members and 81 contracted related service providers supporting our 312 special education students. Students participate in live learning sessions with peers led by certified teachers for 40-60 percent of the school week depending on grade level. Live learning sessions are recorded for all classes to allow students and parents to reference these lessons as needed. Independent rigorous lessons for each school day for all content areas are available 24/7. The growth in students has provided the opportunity for our K-6 teachers to be content experts in lieu of being self-contained. Academic teams provide built-in enrichment time. Resource rooms and special education services are part of the school day and at times occur in the homes of students. Beyond the classroom, students have the opportunity to participate in virtual field trips, music concerts, guest speaker presentations, career fairs, and after-school tutoring and clubs.

Start-of-school benchmark data, from the 2020-21 school year, indicated a need to employ additional reading and math interventionists, and special education teachers. When students are learning from home, public cyber schools must deploy unique and at times intensive human capital to provide the necessary services and supports that result in greater outcomes for students. Through the implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), embedded enrichment time and classroom Tier I interventions across all content areas, our students are on track to meet individual annual growth goals. Individual annual growth targets, as measured by the Scantron Achievement Series, at mid-year indicate there are 36 percent of students in grades 3-6 and 40 percent of students in grades 7-12 who have already met their annual growth targets.

As many schools have experienced, the need for mental health supports have increased since March 2020. Our Student Assistance Program has seen an increase in referrals for counseling services. Small groups led by our school counselors have increased along with parent supports from our social worker, and other Family Engagement and Student Services team members. In order for a public cyber school student to be successful, all team members must communicate. When home and school come together, the student feels connected as it sets the stage for the foundation for creating a community of learning.



Many school districts will most likely maintain their virtual offerings as public education moves forward. Each public cyber charter school differs and so too will each district-run program. Differences offer greater opportunities for students and choice for parents which are good for education. What should be avoided is forcing a student into a virtual program within a district when the law allows for families to have the right to choose which public school is best for their child. District-run virtual programs should be treated as separate schools or local education agencies (LEAs) to allow families and taxpayers the opportunity to see how these schools are performing and how funding is allocated to the virtual program. No public school community should fear funding cuts and flat-funding models only exacerbate inequities in our public education system. We have all lived in fear for too long during this past year.

What can we do moving forward? I would like to see all types of public schools connect and communicate often. Collaborate without judgement and build an equitable community of learning for all children in Pennsylvania. I implore all educational leaders to stop putting others down by marginalizing the value added to a child's life by someone other than themselves. All it does is demonstrate bullying and divisive behaviors that would never be tolerated in our classrooms.

It has been 20 years since we moved into the 21st Century and 67 years since *Brown v. Board of Education*. We must do better to address the inequities of access that clearly show evidence of racial and financial divides based on zip codes. I know we can do better if we do it together!

Again, thank you for allowing me to testify before the committee today and to represent PA's public cyber charter school community.