



AGORA[®]
CYBER CHARTER SCHOOL



The Pennsylvania
LEADERSHIP
CHARTER SCHOOL

Testimony of Richard Jensen, Ed.D., CEO, Agora Cyber Charter School and
Mark Allen, CEO, Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School

For the Basic Education Funding Commission

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

November 16, 2023

Co-Chair Phillips-Hill, Co-Chair Sturla, Members of the Basic Education Funding Commission, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the important role public cyber charter schools play in the Commonwealth.

Established in 2005, Agora Cyber Charter School is an online public school for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Agora's rigorous curriculum is taught by Pennsylvania certified teachers trained to provide virtual instruction in real time and are focused on providing all students with the educational resources and skills needed to become successful lifelong learners. Once enrolled with Agora, each student receives a computer, printer, and all resource materials needed to be successful. An extensive variety of extracurricular online and in-person activities guarantees an enriching assortment of social opportunities providing the student with a well-rounded educational experience.

Founded in 2004, The Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School (PALCS) provides an academically challenging curriculum designed to embrace different types of learners in grades K-12. The school combines core educational content with a custom-built technology platform that integrates multiple educational technology resources. PALCS helps prepare students to be informed, responsible citizens with a global mentality who will succeed through mentoring leadership.

Together, our two schools enroll nearly 8,000 students, and we employ approximately 1,000 public school teachers and support staff. There is no cost to the families who choose Agora or PALCS for their students. Tuition is paid by taxpayers – just like all other public schools. While both of our public cyber charter schools provide a unique educational experience, we share several important attributes:

- For nearly two decades, we have been successfully delivering a fully comprehensive and research-based education using proven virtual platforms.
- We rely on curriculum specifically designed to meet key accessibility standards, and we provide computers, tablets, and other resources so that students can readily access the technology they need.
- We have extensive protocols to ensure student participation.

- Our teachers receive consistent, specialized training to effectively teach and engage students in an online classroom environment.
- We provide a necessary option for families who need an alternative to their traditional district schools.

This last bullet point is worth repeating. Simply put, a virtual classroom is sometimes a better fit for students. Every school year, we provide life-saving educational opportunities for thousands of children who have difficult health circumstances or special needs, who were bullied in their old schools, who live in rural settings without access to the courses they desire, who want to escape struggling urban schools, or who simply have the necessary support system at home to learn virtually.

Nothing tells the public cyber charter school story better than specific examples about the tremendous impact we are having on children and their families:

- A parent of a child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) – determined by her school district – was greatly concerned with the anxiety her daughter faced and how she saw her daughter shutting down and continually struggle in school. Someone recommended Agora, and she was willing to give the school a try. Almost immediately, she saw her daughter begin to thrive and become successful in her academics. Her daughter is even starting to see growth in socialization and interaction with others in her classes. She will tell you that Agora is the public-school option where her child belongs and when she can really excel.
- About two years into a student's schooling at Agora, he suffered from a seizure that led to a fall, causing a head injury requiring several days in the hospital. Medications to control the seizures caused complications and additional hospitalizations. He needed therapy to learn to walk properly and had far more than his fair share of medical appointments. Through it all, Agora made accommodations to work around his challenges and schedule. The Agora team even consulted with doctors to make sure everything done in school was supporting his recovery and well-being. During a time when the family was frightened for their child's health and future, the Agora team provided guidance and confidence.
- "For the past 13 years, Paige, a PALCS student, has dedicated a significant portion of her time to becoming a successful competitive gymnast. She currently trains six days per week (30+ hours) at Parkettes National Gymnastics Training Center in Allentown. She has competed throughout the United States and in Canada as an all-around gymnast (vault, balance beam, uneven bars, and floor exercise) and has won numerous medals in state, regional, and national competitions. Last season, she qualified as an Elite level gymnast, which is a tremendous accomplishment - less than 1% of competitive gymnasts become Elite gymnasts. It is from the Elite ranks that members of the US National team and US Olympic team are selected. In November 2022, Paige signed her National Letter of Intent to accept a full athletic scholarship to Iowa State

University. Iowa State is a Division I school in the Big 12 conference. This is on top of completing her high school academic career in three years with a GPA well above 4.0."

- Another PALCS student, Stefan, was able to pursue flight training while a student at the school. He entered college with his private pilot's license. In addition, the AP coursework he completed in high school allowed him to enter college with one semester completed. He is graduating with a degree in leadership and organizational Management, with a concentration in aviation. He has been a flight instructor at Brandywine Regional Airport since last fall.

We'd also like to note that student diversity, equity, and inclusion have long been top priorities for Agora, PALCS and public cyber charter schools. Several public cyber charter schools have percentages of traditionally under-served student populations that are significantly higher than the state average, such as students of color and economically disadvantaged students. As a group, public cyber charter schools also have significantly higher rates of economically disadvantaged students and students with IEPs – many of which were established prior to the student enrolling in a public cyber charter school, and all of which require school district approval.

These are all reasons to ensure continued access to a strong and well-funded system of public cyber charter schools. It also underscores why comparing students in public cyber charter schools with their peers in traditional classrooms is not an apples-to-apples comparison.

Our virtual classrooms provide the best opportunity for many students to succeed, and no matter what the circumstance, we educate these students for a fraction of the cost when looking at overall education spending in the Commonwealth. We also do it while being subject to the highest level of accountability that includes extensive reporting requirements, audits, and charter renewal processes.

In rough numbers, Agora and PALCS – like all public cyber charter schools – receive about 75 percent of what bricks-and-mortar public schools receive to educate the very same students. This is a challenge because we not only have most of the same costs as school districts – teacher salaries, staff pension and insurance costs, attendance and other central office costs, etc., but we also have expenses not typically born by districts. These include funding for staff positions like family coaches/mentors that are unique to public cyber charter schools, significant technology infrastructure, online curriculum costs, and major costs related to securing statewide testing sites.

This means that school districts keep a significant portion—25% on average—of the funding allocated for the students who leave their schools to enter public cyber charters even though these students are no longer being educated in a traditional district classroom. We emphasize this because these are funds school districts can use to help offset fixed costs such as facility maintenance, utilities, etc.

Further, the Pennsylvania Department of Education gives school districts significant discretion to determine exactly how much funding it will forward for a student who enrolls in one of our schools. We should note that the deductions currently allowed on the funding form for school districts go well beyond what the charter school law intended.

In sum, the portion of funding that follows students who enroll in public cyber charter schools generally represents less than two percent of a school district's overall budget. In many cases, even with this insignificant expenditure, school districts are still able to maintain very healthy surpluses.

We commend the Commission for its work to bolster education funding in the Commonwealth, and we understand there are many challenges that need to be addressed. That said, we ask that you to resist efforts to prioritize any one public school option over another. More specifically, we strongly oppose efforts to create a flat reimbursement rate for public cyber charter schools that fails to realistically account for the actual cost of running our schools.

Every public school – whether it is bricks and mortar or cyber – is unique for any number of reasons. However, all schools have one very important challenge in common. Schools cannot be all things for all students. That's why we are asking the Commission to pursue only those funding recommendations that allow for a robust system of public cyber charter schools. Agora, PALCS, and other public cyber charter schools are a public-school option that tens of thousands of families have determined to be the best educational fit for their children. And, the decisions of these families have no negative impact to their home district's bottom line.

In closing, Agora and PALCS believe that if all public-school voices work together—rather than as adversaries—we can ensure that every child has equal, affordable access to the type of education that is best for their individual need. We see countless examples every day that prove this very real and important point. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony to the Commission.