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More than 30 Public School Superintendents in Greater Philadelphia Call for Charter Reform
Leaders Form Coalition and Support a Moratorium on New Charter Enrollment Until Laws Can be Reformed

Leaders from public school districts in the five-county Greater Philadelphia region are joining with others from across the state in calling for meaningful, substantive reform of Pennsylvania's charter school laws. They also support a moratorium on new charter school applications and a freeze on additional seats for students at existing charters until reform is enacted.

Public school superintendents and other top school administrators recently formed LEARN, Leaders for Educational Accountability and Reform Network, as a way to coalesce around urgent issues impacting public schools, such as charter reform. They are calling for reform to the way charters are funded, as well as an improvement in accountability and oversight.

Citing an extremely inequitable funding system, LEARN says charter schools, which are often among the worst performing schools in the state, are straining public systems. Extreme increases in charter costs are sending an increasingly greater amount of public tax dollars to charters, over which locally elected school boards have little-to-no authority or oversight. LEARN wants to bring charter tuition payments in line with actual school district costs, and provide more accountability.

"When charter law was written more than 20 years ago, it promised innovation and better performance," said Norristown Area School District Superintendent Chris Dormer, whose district hosted LEARN's first press conference, January 27 at Whitehall Elementary School. "The reality is that most charters simply duplicate traditional schools, and have not helped to close achievement gaps. In fact, many of the state's charters are performing no better, and in many cases worse than the public schools whose neighborhoods they draw from. Our taxpayers are simply not getting the bang for their buck. Local school districts, taxpayers, and students are all losing out."

Many school superintendents say they've had to cut staffing or not fill positions as retirement occur, slash programs, and delay projects as a result of skyrocketing charter school payments.

LEARN says the funding formula for charter schools must be changed to reflect the actual cost needed to educate students. The group is calling for a flat tuition rate for all cyber charter schools and a change in the special education rate for all charters. Currently, many charters are collecting upwards of \$30,000 per student for special education services that cost much less.

"It's time that our taxpayers have some accountability for the way these schools are spending their money," said Dr. Frank Gallagher, Superintendent of the Souderton Area School District. "We are not opposed to school choice, but we deserve to compete on the same playing field. The system is simply not equitable in any way, and our students and taxpayers are both losing out."

LEARN superintendents are frustrated that charter law treats both cyber and brick and mortar charters very differently from public schools. For example, charters are only required to have 75% of their teaching staff appropriately certified (compared to 100% in traditional public school districts.) Charter teachers don't have to be evaluated in the same way that traditional public school teachers do. Charters are largely exempt from many of the mandates that public schools face. In addition, many charters are run by for-profit companies and spend taxpayer dollars on advertising.

LEARN also wants to see reform of the Charter Appeals Board (CAB), which has the ability to overrule local school boards. Currently, CAB is comprised of individuals who were appointed years ago, whose terms have all expired, and most of whom have connections to charter schools. It's not an impartial body as intended by law. Districts want greater authority to close under-performing charter schools, something that's been difficult under CAB's jurisdiction.

In 2017-18, school districts paid \$1.8 billion in tuition to charter schools; \$1.3 billion to brick and mortar charters and almost \$500 million to cybers. Charter costs increased \$170 million or 10% from the prior year.

LEARN is applauding Governor Wolf for addressing the need for charter reform, and is asking that the legislature quickly move to enact true reform of charter law. LEARN is joined in this call by a number of statewide organizations, including the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA), the Pennsylvania League of Urban Schools – a Caucus of PASA, the Pennsylvania Association of Rural Schools, and the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials.

At its press conference January 27, speakers included: Dr. Frank Gallagher, Superintendent of the Souderton Area School District; Dr. Chris Dormer, Superintendent of the Norristown Area School District; Dr. Samuel Lee, Superintendent of the Bensalem School District; Dr. Jim Scanlon, Superintendent of the West Chester Area School District; Dr. Wagner Marseilles, Superintendent of the Cheltenham School District; Joyce Wilkerson, President of the Board of Education of the School District of Philadelphia; a Souderton Area Senior High School student; PA State Representative Matthew Bradford.

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