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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

Education Funding: The Promise of Level Up, Need for Charter Funding Reform,
and Threat of School Vouchers

Wednesday, October 12, 2022 | 10 a.m.

Representative Mark Longietti

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 10 a.m. | Opening comments |
| 10:05 | Justi Glaros, Superintendent
<i>Sharon City School District</i>
<i>Q & A with Legislators</i> |
| 10:35 | Tresa Templeton, Business Manager and Board Secretary
<i>Sharon City School District</i>
<i>Q & A with Legislators</i> |
| 11:05 | Tim McGonigle, County Commissioner
<i>Mercer County</i>
<i>Q & A with Legislators</i> |
| 11:35 | Rev. Dr. Lora Adams-King, Superintendent
<i>Farrell Area School District</i>
<i>Q & A with Legislators</i> |

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**Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee
Testimony**

presented by

**Ms. Justi Glaros
October 13, 2022**

Good morning, Chairman Miller, Chairman Longiotti, and distinguished members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Justi Glaros, Superintendent of the Sharon City School District. I appreciate the opportunity to provide our school district's story and the financial and programmatic impacts of House Bill 272 (Charter funding reform), the detriments of House Bill 2169 (Voucher bill) and the benefits of the Level Up Funding to our students and school community.

Pennsylvania Charter School Law needs improved for both charter schools and traditional public schools to better serve and ensure optimal learning opportunities our students. The funding formula for charter schools must be updated to reflect the actual cost needed to educate students in these alternative environments. Charter school tuition increased by more than \$200 million across the commonwealth in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. In addition, the pandemic resulted in a significant spike of cyber charter school enrollment, resulting in an increase of approximately 24,000 students at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. This has resulted in tuition payments to cyber charter schools increasing by an estimated \$350 million in this current year and approximately \$440 million more in tuition for charter schools and cyber charter schools combined, according to the PASBO-PASA-PARSS Budget Report released in January 2021. In the Sharon City School District, we have nearly 100 students currently enrolled in an outside cyber charter school.

To respond to family requests for online learning, especially as a result of the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, the District created a hybrid program for the 2020-2021 school year affording students the option of learning from home. In addition, we launched the Sharon City Cyber Academy. Both initiatives required additional resources and support for our staff. While our efforts were somewhat helpful in deterring our students from going to an outside cyber charter, we still financially support a number of students enrolled in these schools, often having

never seen them in the District as they move from one district to the next while already enrolled in the cyber charter school. Our total cyber charter tuition costs equal a little more than \$2 million yearly. More than three times the amount the District spends on our own cyber academy.

This increase in cyber charter costs for our District has contributed greatly to our past budget deficits of over \$2 million yearly. Although we have students transition to charter programs, this has not changed the number of classrooms and teachers we need to maintain in our District for our in-district students. In other words, there are no savings by having these students leave our district programs – it is just a loss of our revenue that we need to absorb by either closing programs, raising local taxes or taking away from other programs for our students in our district.

The current charter school funding formula results in significant percentage increases in charter school tuition each year. As school district budgets increase, charter school tuition increases at a much higher rate than inflation or the consumer price index based on the current charter school funding formula. The tuition formula needs to reflect a realistic operating cost for cyber charter schools based on actual expenditures.

The cost of special education students attending charter schools needs to be changed to accurately reflect the costs of educating special needs children. The current formula assumes that 16% of the District's population is classified as special education. Therefore, the total cost of a District's special education expenditures is divided by 16%, which is added on the tuition bill for cyber student if they have an IEP. The charter costs to our district per student with special needs is over \$1 million annually. Using the four-tiered Special Education Funding formula to calculate the special education tuition for all charter school students will better reflect actual costs of providing services to special education students based on their individualized educational program. This was a recommendation from the bipartisan Special Education Funding Commission and will save school districts an estimated \$99 million annually.

In addition to financial inequities and unfair burden to our districts, we have witnessed firsthand the impact of online learning on student skill acquisition, growth and development. These charter schools are not held to the same accountability requirements as the public school system.

The aggressive advertising of these companies lures students away from in person attendance in our schools and as educators and professionals, we believe the impact and benefit of in person learning far outweighs what students gain from a cyber-charter school.

The proposed Lifeline Scholarships allows parents in low performing schools (bottom 15%) or special education students, including 504 students and gifted students, to apply for the scholarship. The money used for the scholarships are deducted from the school districts' state allocations. Estimated cost to districts is approximately \$144 million annually. Our West Hill Elementary School is one of the schools that falls under this provision. Families choosing to apply for a scholarship could deduct a significant amount per child from our District finances, creating a similar concern that we have with charter tuition. Additionally, we are concerned that non-public schools are not governed by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees students with disabilities and their parents with significant protections and rights related to the student's education.

A real positive for our District was the Level Up funding this year. As part of the 2022–23 budget, a \$225 million equity supplement, Level Up, was added to the state's 100 school districts that have the greatest student need and the fewest resources. The Sharon City School District, will receive a supplement of approximately \$1.2 million this year, and received a little over \$500,000 during the 2021-2022 school year. These additional, much needed funds have allowed the District to fill gaps across the budget and maintain programs and support for our students. We cannot thank you enough for recognizing the inequity in our funding for our students and for providing these funds.

I know the focus of this session is to address the aforementioned concerns, but while I have your ear I would also like to speak on additional concerns we are facing in our school system. The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on our students is evident, both academically and in regards to mental health and well-being. We have worked hard to combat learning loss, re acclimate students to the school environment and support their social and emotional needs. ESSER funding has supported these efforts, but we fear the likely fiscal cliff that will present itself in 2024, and how we will be able to maintain the extra supports we have added as a result of these

funds. We have also seen an increase in the number of students in need of special education supports, and the unpredicted and rising costs of supports for them has also greatly impacted our budget. Finally, the difficulty in finding staff and filling positions has created an additional challenge on implementing the programming and supports we know will benefit our students.

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on these critical issues and are happy to answer any questions.

Testimony of Tresa Templeton,

Business Manager/Board Secretary,

Sharon City School District

Chairman Bizzarro, Chairman Longiotti and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning about education funding and specifically regarding the promise of Level Up funding, the need for charter and cyber charter school funding reform and the threat of school vouchers. I am Tresa Templeton and I serve as the Business Manager and Board Secretary of the Sharon City School District.

Let me start with the good news. The Level Up funding provided to the Sharon City School District in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 state budgets has been critically important for the school district. As you know, Level Up funding is a supplement provided to the 20% of school districts that are the most underfunded school districts in the Commonwealth. These school districts, like Sharon City, Farrell Area and Greenville Area, in Mercer County, are located in low-wealth communities and the districts cannot raise enough money at the local level, even with a very high local tax effort. In many cases, these same districts saw the largest percentage cuts when nearly \$1 billion in state education funding was cut during the Corbett Administration. We are finally, now recovering from those cuts over 10 years later, due in large part to Level Up funding.

Level up identifies the 100 school districts with the fewest resources relative to student needs. It uses student weights from the Basic Education and Special Education funding formulas to measure the additional needs of students in each school district to create a weighted student count. The 100 districts with the lowest level of funding available per weighted student over the

last five years are the districts with the fewest resources available to meet their students' needs, and therefore, receive a share of Level Up funding.

This supplemental funding for Sharon City School District during the 2021-22 school year amounted to approximately \$543,000 and in the current school year it will mean approximately \$1.25 million. These funds have been used to fill in gaps across our entire budget. For example, our school district was looking at a \$2 million deficit, even with a 3-mill tax hike, before the passage of the state budget which included the critically needed Level Up funding as well as increases in Basic Education and Special Education subsidies. Since a mill of taxes produces about \$90,000 in our school district, a \$2 million gap equates to over 22 mills in taxes.

Obviously, we could never make up such a shortfall on our own.

One of the most significant mandated costs our school districts face are tuition payments for students attending charter and cyber charter school. While these schools advertise themselves as “free” there is a large, and growing cost to taxpayers. In the 2020-21 school year, our school district paid over \$1.13 million to brick and mortar charter schools and \$1.95 million to cyber charter schools for a grand total of \$3.1 million in taxpayer funds. And payments to cyber charter schools grew by over \$1 million in just five years.

The most frustrating part of cyber charter tuition costs is that the amount paid is totally unrelated to the actual cost of educating students in such a setting. Cyber schools do not have the same cost structure as brick-and- mortar schools yet their tuition payments are based upon what it costs to educate students in our school district where we incur the cost of maintaining buildings,

utilities, debt service on those building and related costs. And each school district pays a different tuition rate to cyber charter schools because the rate is based upon each district's per pupil spending. Further, our in-house cyber academy operates at a small fraction of the tuition cost paid to a cyber charter school. Clearly, taxpayers are the losers in this patently unfair system, since they pick up the unnecessary cost, and students in our district also lose since they are starved of needed resources and programs.

The tuition charges for special education students attending charter and cyber charter schools are also unfair and inflated. Charter and cyber charter schools were inexplicably exempted from the Special Education Funding formula, which was designed to eliminate such problems, several years ago. When a special education student attends a charter or cyber charter school, the tuition rate is based upon the school district's average special education cost; but the calculation is not the real average. It is assumed, for all school districts, that 16% of students are classified to receive special education services. In our school district the actual percentage is 32% of students, or twice as many. In raw numbers, last year our district had about 660 special education students. But the calculation used to determine charter and cyber charter tuition assumed we had only 330 special education students. Since our overall special education costs were about \$8 million the real average cost per student, based upon 660 students, was about \$12,000. But our tuition rate was double that amount, or around \$24,000. This is an incredible windfall for charter and cyber charter schools, paid for by taxpayers.

The reforms proposed in House Bill 272 would correct these overpayments. For Sharon City School District, this would translate into over \$1,000,000 in savings, equating to over 11 mills of local property taxes.

An alarming trend we have seen is families moving into our district, to take advantage of the affordable housing stock, but their children never set foot in our buildings. Instead, they are enrolled in a cyber charter school even though our in-house Sharon Cyber Academy offers a superior cyber option for students. These cyber charter schools have excess revenues that they use to advertise and lure in students, while school districts lack the resources they need to educate students to adequacy, and certainly do not have marketing budgets.

Finally, I want to touch on how the school voucher bill, House Bill 2169, which passed the House last year, would hurt our school district and the children that we educate. West Hill Elementary School would be directly affected by this legislation. If 10% of the students at West Hill took a voucher and left for a private school, we would lose about 25 students and about \$200,000 in state funds. It is most likely that these students would be spread out across the elementary grades. As a result, it would not be feasible to eliminate a teaching position in any of the grades as class sizes would balloon to an unacceptable level. Building costs remain the same. So, this would be just another blow to our budget and it would be ultimately borne by taxpayers or we would be forced to eliminate important programs that students need. It is yet another example of taking resources away from needy students and putting an additional burden on taxpayers who are already overburdened.

Once again, I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today, and I am happy to answer any questions.

Testimony of Mercer County Commissioner, Tim McGonigle

Chairman Bizzarro, Chairman Longiotti and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss Education Funding in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and how funding issues effect Mercer County school children. My name is Tim McGonigle and I have served as a Mercer County Commissioner for nearly seven years.

At the county level, we are focused on making sure our next generation of Mercer County workers have the skills they need to succeed in an ever-changing workplace and in the 21st century economy. We are also focused on economic development which includes helping our local companies to grow and create jobs, attracting new companies offering good jobs, and growing the next generation of entrepreneurs and business owners from our populace. Our K-12 public schools are at the heart of this focus, since they provide the foundation necessary for our students to take their place in the future of our community.

As you know, the funding needed for schools to successfully educate our children generally come from two sources: state funds allocated annually through the state budget, and local funds coming primarily from property taxes levied on local homeowners and businesses. While state funding has increased significantly during the years of the Wolf Administration, Pennsylvania is still near the bottom of states in the share of school funding coming from the state. Currently, less than 40% of the funding is provided by state sources. That means that the lion's share of funding comes from local property taxes, which is, perhaps, the most unfair method of taxation, and which strains the budgets of many families and Senior Citizens in particular.

Due to an over reliance on property taxes, Pennsylvania also has the distinction of being one of most inequitable states in regard to school funding. On average, the wealthiest school districts, with a strong local tax base, spend \$4,800 more per student than the poorest school districts, with the weakest local tax base. In some cases, the difference in per student funding is \$10,000 per student or even more. It is no wonder that the Commonwealth was sued by a collection of school districts for not meeting its constitutional mandate to provide for a thorough and efficient system of public education and for not providing for the equal protection of its citizens under the law. The trial on that case was recently concluded and many observers believe that the Commonwealth will end up losing that case.

I commend this panel for being strong advocates for increasing state funding for our public schools and for the work that you have done to try and address this issue. However, as you know, more needs to be done. One area of focus needs to be passing Charter School reform. Many taxpayers do not realize that our public schools are required to pay tuition to charter schools when a public school student leaves for a charter, and that they are footing the bill. They also may not know that the tuition rate for students attending cyber charter schools is not based on the cost of educating those students, but, instead, is based upon the school district's per pupil cost. In other words, cyber charter schools currently receive a windfall because they are don't have the same fixed costs of school district, like building and utility expenses, but they get compensated like they do, all using taxpayer money.

Further, while the General Assembly adopted a funding formula to distribute state special education funding to school districts, that formula was not applied to charter schools. Again, this

results in a windfall for charter schools at the expense of taxpayers. The funding formula recognizes that not all special education students are the same; some require a low-level of services, some require a moderate level of services and some require intensive services. Under the formula, a lower amount of money is allocated to schools for students with lesser needs as compared to students with greater needs. But charter schools get an allocation based upon an overall average cost, which ends up being much higher when the student is in the lesser need category. And for cyber charter schools almost 99% of their special education students are in the lesser need category. Additionally, the average cost is based upon an assumption that only 16% of the sending school district's students are special education students; this also results in a windfall when the actual percentage is higher. In Sharon City School District the actual percentage is much higher as it is around 30% of the students.

There is a remedy for this problem. House Bill 272, which is co-sponsored by Chairman Bizzarro and Chairman Longietti would use a fixed tuition rate for cyber charter schools that is based upon the actual cost to educate students in that setting, and it would apply the Special Education Funding Formula to all charter schools. I am disappointed to say that Mercer County's other two state representatives, Parke Wentling and Tim Bonner have refused to co-sponsor this bill or to push for its passage. If enacted, it would save taxpayers an estimated \$373 million in the first year alone. Locally, it would save taxpayers in the following districts these amounts: Farrell Area School District - \$325,331; Greenville Area School District - \$178,041; Hermitage School District - \$86,301; Jamestown Area School District - \$126,358; Reynolds School District - \$144,524; Sharon City School District - \$1,076,290; Sharpsville Area School District - \$59,764; and West Middlesex Area School District - \$100,935. These savings mean

that local property taxpayers are relieved of a burden. It also means that students in our local schools receive resources they need to succeed. I urge you to continue to push for the adoption of this much needed reform.

Instead, of adopting reforms that will save local taxpayers money, while doing right by our students, earlier this year the General Assembly passed an ill-advised school voucher bill that would put more of a burden on local property taxpayers while shortchanging our public school students. This was in the form of House Bill 2169 which passed the House by a very slim margin. I want to thank Chairman Bizzarro and Chairman Longietti, and the members of this panel, for voting against this legislation. However, I am disappointed that the other two Mercer County state representatives, Parke Wentling and Tim Bonner helped supply the votes to narrowly pass it in the House.

The school voucher bill would entice students to leave certain schools to attend a private school and it would divert money from our public schools, where close to 90% of our students are educated, to fund private education. It is predicted that 10% of students in these schools might leave resulting in a cost to taxpayers of about \$170 million statewide. Public schools would be forced to fund this cost, which means they would either need to raise local property taxes, hurting our residents, or make cuts to the school program, hurting local school children. You see, when 10% of the students leave a school, the fixed costs remain the same. The school still has the same building and utility costs, and it is not feasible to layoff a teacher because class sizes would balloon to an unacceptable level.

In Mercer County, House Bill 2169 would directly affect the High School and Middle School at Farrell Area School District and West Hill Elementary School at the Sharon City School District, since these schools are among the 15% of lowest performing schools in terms of student performance on standardized tests. The common thread with the schools in this category is that they are in high-poverty areas. So, these are the very schools that are not receiving the amount of state funding needed to educate their students and that lack the local tax base to provide sufficient local funding. If House Bill 2169 were enacted, and if 10% of the students at these schools left for private schools, as estimate, it would cost taxpayers in Farrell approximately \$238,121 and in Sharon approximately \$202,612.

What's worse is that there are no accountability measures in the bill regarding the private schools that would benefit from it. The students in these schools are not required to take standardized tests and they don't. They might well be among the 15% of lowest performing schools if the mandate applied to them. But the supporters of this bill refuse to apply any such accountability measures to these schools, even though taxpayer dollars would be used to support them.

And there are no income guidelines in regard to families receiving taxpayer dollars to send their children to a private school under the bill. So, a family that is very wealthy and living in one of the most desirable sections of Sharon would receive the same "scholarship" to send their child to a private school, financed by property taxpayers across Sharon and including in some of the poorest neighborhoods, all while the students remaining in the public school suffer from less available resources. It is a wrong-headed approach and, if adopted, proponents would next push

for it to be expanded to all public schools. Ultimately, it would lead to the demise of one of the most democratic inventions of our society – free public education.

So, in closing, I want to thank Chairman Bizzarro, Chairman Longietti and this panel for your advocacy and hard work in providing a quality, public education to all our students and doing right by local taxpayers and I want to encourage you to keep up the fight.

**Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee
Testimony on Charter School Tuition Payments**

presented by

**Dr. Lora Adams-King
October 12, 2022**

Good morning, Chairman Bizzarro, Chairman Longietti, and distinguished members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Dr. Lora Adams-King, Superintendent of the Farrell Area School District. I appreciate the opportunity to provide our school district's story and the financial and programmatic impacts of House Bill 272 (Charter funding reform), the detriments of House Bill 2169 (Voucher bill) and the benefits of the Level Up Funding to our students and school community.

Pennsylvania Charter School Law needs improved for both charter schools and traditional public schools based on more than two decades of data and observation of charter school operations in the commonwealth. The funding formula for charter schools must be updated to reflect the actual cost needed to educate students in these alternative environments. Charter school tuition increased by more than \$200 million across the commonwealth in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. In addition, the pandemic resulted in a significant spike of cyber charter school enrollment, resulting in an increase of approximately 24,000 students at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. This has resulted in tuition payments to cyber charter schools increasing by an estimated \$350 million in this current year and approximately \$440 million more in tuition for charter schools and cyber charter schools combined, according to the PASBO-PASA-PARSS Budget Report released in January 2021. Cyber charter school enrollment over the past three (3) years is as follows: 2019/2020 – 65 students, 2020/2021 – 72 students, 2021/2022 – 68 students. This three year, cumulative total of 205 students cost the Farrell Area School District \$1,034,097.11 (2019/2020), \$1,488,646.44 (2020/2021), and \$1,794,856.36 (2021/2022). Based upon the aforementioned data trends, cyber charter school enrollment will cost the Farrell Area School District (one of the poorest school districts in the Commonwealth) more than \$2 million.

This increase in cyber charter costs for our district has resulted in the following negative impacts in our

school programs and resources: a property tax increase to an already distressed community where several business have requested property tax reassessments to lower the amount of taxes they are currently paying, thus lowering the amount of much needed tax revenue to operate the school district (currently, one mill of property taxes only brings in \$49,000), and the absorption of some staff through attrition. The only reason that the District did not experience cuts in staffing and programs is because of our ESSER funds (which are temporary), and the much needed Level Up funding we received through the benevolence of caring, understanding legislators such as yourself. Keep in mind that the number of students who choose to go to charter schools does not change the number of classrooms and teachers we need to maintain in our district for our in-district students. In other words, there are no savings by having these students leave our district programs – it is just a loss of our revenue that we need to absorb by either closing programs, raising local taxes or taking away from other programs for the students in our district.

As evidenced in my earlier statements, the current charter school funding formula results in significant percentage increases in charter school tuition each year. As school district budgets increase, charter school tuition increases at a much higher rate than inflation or the consumer price index based on the current charter school funding formula.

Many traditional public school districts have been operating full-time, on-line learning programs for their students for years at substantially lower cost than what they are paying for a student to attend a cyber charter school. In most cases, school districts operate full-time online learning programs for their students using the same on-line curriculum and learning management system that cyber charter schools use at **half** the cost of cyber charter school tuition. Currently, the cost of educating a student in our own cyber school is \$4,140 for a regular education student and \$6,845 for a special education student. The tuition formula needs to reflect a realistic operating cost for cyber charter schools based on actual expenditures.

The cost of special education students attending charter schools needs to be changed to accurately reflect the costs of educating special needs children. The current formula assumes that 16% of the district's population is classified as special education. Therefore, the total cost of a district's special education expenditures is divided by 16%, which is added onto the tuition bill for a cyber

student if they have an IEP. Last year our special education population was 31%. Therefore, we must use local dollars and Level Up monies to make up the difference. The charter costs to our district per student with special needs is \$43,000 while the regular education cost is \$18,000. Using the four-tiered Special Education Funding formula to calculate the special education tuition for all charter school students will better reflect actual costs of providing services to special education students based on their individualized educational program. This was a recommendation from the bipartisan Special Education Funding Commission and will save school districts an estimated \$99 million annually.

The proposed Lifeline Scholarships allows parents in low performing schools (bottom 15%) or special education students, including 504 students and gifted students, to apply for the scholarship. The money used for the scholarships are deducted from the school districts state allocations with only transportation subsidies being excluded. Estimated cost to districts is approximately \$144 million annually. Additionally, non-public schools are not governed by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees students with disabilities and their parents with significant protections and rights related to the student's education. Farrell Area High School/Upper Middle School is one of the schools that fall under this provision. For any student that parents choose to apply for a scholarship, the state will deduct monies from our district finances; creating a similar concern that we have with charter tuition.

A real positive for our district was the Level Up funding this year. As part of the 2022–23 budget, a \$225 million equity supplement, Level Up, was added to the state's 100 school districts that have the greatest student need and the fewest resources. For the Farrell Area School District, we received a \$732,983.89 supplement. These additional, much needed funds allowed our district to maintain smaller class sizes (which greatly benefits our students), provide Social Emotional Learning (to address mental health needs exacerbated by the pandemic), and academic remediation to close the learning gaps, and address learning loss brought on by the pandemic. We cannot thank you enough for recognizing the inequity in our funding for our students and providing these funds.

While some may argue that students in the Farrell Area School District may fare better (academically, etc.) in a cyber charter or other school, due to some of the following challenges: higher than normal transiency rate, high poverty (100% free lunch, district-wide Title 1 services), designation of being a low performing school, we must look past the limited snapshot of standardized tests and see that Farrell students are learning. Here is some data to support that.

FHS SENIOR CLASS ENROLLMENT and SCHOLARSHIP AMOUNTS

Year	Sr. Class Enrollment	Scholarship Amount
*2019 - 2020	46	\$401,700
2020 – 2021	48	\$3,100,585
2021 – 2022	44	\$2,421,835

*This represents the class of 2020, COVID year. Therefore, data is skewed and inconclusive.

In addition, some students are graduating from the Farrell Area High School with at least 12 college credits that can transfer to the college of their choice upon graduation from high school (and thus helping to avoid an enormous amount of student loan debt), as a result of participation in the District's (free) dual enrollment program. Our students are also being taught soft skills in order to better equip them to live in our global society.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on these critical issues and are happy to answer any questions.