

## **Charter School Frequently Asked Questions**

**Pocono Mountain School District is receiving many questions from community members regarding charter schools. To assist our community members in gaining access to accurate information quickly, the District has compiled the following list of the most frequently asked questions it is receiving and answers to those questions.**

### **Q1. What are charter schools?**

Answer: Charter schools were established by the passage of the Charter School Law in 1997. Charter schools were created to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, students and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently from the existing school district structure.

### **Q2. Why does Pennsylvania have charter schools?**

Answer: The rationale behind Pennsylvania's Charter School Law was to create these independent public schools that were exempt from many of the mandates imposed on traditional public schools to accomplish the following: improve student learning; increase learning opportunities for all students; encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods; create new professional opportunities for teachers; provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system; and be accountable for meeting measurable academic standards.

### **Q3. Who can apply for a Charter?**

Answer: A charter school may be established by an individual; one or more teachers who will teach at the proposed charter school; parents or guardians of students who will enroll in the charter school; a nonsectarian college, university or museum located in the Commonwealth; a nonsectarian, nonprofit corporation; a corporation, association or partnership; or any combination of the above.

A charter school must be operated by a non-profit entity governed by a board of trustees, and a charter applicant must provide a clear description of the method of appointment or election of members of the board of trustees.

### **Q4. Do charter schools have to offer something different or better than Pocono Mountain School District offers to its students?**

Answer: The charter school law requires a charter school to offer programming that provides students with expanded choices in the type of educational opportunities available in the school district and other public schools.

### **Q5. Do charter schools have to follow the same rules as other public schools?**

Answer: Yes and no. Some of the rules that apply to school districts also apply to charter schools. But charter schools are exempt from certain educational mandates that school districts have to follow. For example:

- Only 75 percent of charter school teachers are required to hold a state teaching certification in the subject they teach.

- Charter schools appoint their own Board of Trustees, while the PMSD School Board Directors are elected by the public.
- Many charter schools do not allow their staff to participate in the Public School Employees Retirement System (“PSERS”), which results in a significant cost savings to the charter school compared to that mandated by law for school districts.
- Charter schools are not required to comply with the same public bidding requirements for construction projects.
- Charter schools are not subject to the caseload requirements for special education staff that school districts must meet, which means charter schools may serve students with disabilities with fewer professionals than how the same students must be served by law in the school district even though the students possesses the same needs regardless of where they enroll.
- Historically, many charter schools do not serve large numbers of students who have low incidence disabilities and need a more robust and costly level of service, compared to similar populations of students served by school districts.
- Funds received by charter schools for enrolled students are not reflective of the actual costs for services provided to those students, but are rather based on the school district’s own costs in educating a different population. (As noted above, the school district’s costs are disproportionate to the mandates on, and costs to, the charter school.)
- School districts must transport students to and from charter schools at the cost and expense of the school district, without reimbursement from the charter schools.

These latter exemptions reflect significant costs that school districts shoulder that charter schools do not.

**Q6. Are charter schools exempt from all Federal and State mandates?**

Answer: Charter schools are exempt from some Federal and State mandates that those governing bodies impose on public school districts. Charter schools are not exempt from certain mandates involving health and safety, civil rights, student accountability, employee criminal history and background checks, open meetings, Right to Know Law information requirements, generally accepted accounting principles, and certain provisions of the Pennsylvania School Code.

**Q7. Do charter schools have to teach a curriculum aligned to the PA academic standards?**

Answer: Yes. All public schools, including charter schools, are required to align their curriculum to the applicable PA standards.

**Q8. Do charter school students have to take state assessments?**

Answer: Yes. Charter school students must take required state standardized assessments, including the PSSA exams and the Keystone Exams, unless the parents apply to opt their child/children out of testing based upon the state approved opt-out criteria.

**Q9. Does a graduate of a charter school receive a PMSD diploma?**

Answer: No, the graduate of a charter school receives a diploma from the charter school in which the student is enrolled at the time of graduation.

**Q10. If a parent has a concern with how a student is treated at a charter school, can the Superintendent or PMSD Board of Education assist the parent with their concern?**

Answer: The charter school has its own Administration and Board of Trustees that is responsible for the charter school's operations. A charter school's day-to-day operations are independent of PMSD's operations.

**Q11. What if I want my child to attend a charter school, but they tell me they don't offer the services my child needs to attend that school?**

Answer: Charter schools are not allowed to refuse enrollment to students based on the services required by the student. Nor may charter schools inform parents of enrolled students that the students' needs can no longer be met by the charter school or suggest that the student's needs would be better met by enrolling in the school district. The charter school must provide all special education services needed by any student who seeks enrollment or whose needs change after enrollment.

**Q12. Does the PMSD Board of Education have to approve all charter school applications?**

Answer: The PMSD Board of Education is the chartering school district for any charter school proposing to open within Pocono Mountain's boundaries. The decision of whether to approve or deny a charter application is, by law, required to be made by the Pocono Mountain School District's Board of Directors. There is a legal process school districts must follow when reviewing applications to open a charter school.

**Q13. If the PMSD Board of Education denies a charter school application, what happens next?**

Answer: The charter school applicant may resubmit a revised application to the district, take steps to appeal the decision to the State Charter School Appeal Board, or not take any further action.

**Q14. How are charter schools funded?**

Answer: Charter schools are independently run public schools paid for by tax dollars, authorized and primarily funded by the school districts from which their students reside. Districts send charter schools a per-student payment. The per student payment amount is calculated based on a formula in the law and the payment amount varies by school district based on the district of residence's budgeted expenditures (for regular and special education). Since the formula looks only at the district of residence's expenses and not those of the charter/cyber charter to provide an educational program, the formula results in districts paying different amounts (and potentially overpaying) for students attending the same charter or cyber charter school and receiving the same education.

**Q15. Who determines the funding formula for charter school tuition rates?**

Answer: The State Legislature mandated the funding formula used to calculate payment rates for school district students to attend charter schools.

**Q16. Are charter schools tuition free?**

Answer: Charter schools are tuition free for parents, but are paid for by the taxpayers. Charter schools are funded primarily through the tuition they receive from the resident school districts of the students who enroll.

**Q17. Do charter schools return any excess funding to the school district at the end of the school year?**

Answer: No, charter schools are not required to return any excess funding to the sending school districts.

**Q18. Can school districts negotiate the payment rates paid to charter schools?**

Answer: The payment rate to charter schools is established by law.

**Q19. What are the current charter school tuition rates for Pocono Mountain School District students to attend a charter school or cyber charter school?**

Answer: The 2019-2020 Pocono Mountain School District charter school tuition rate for each regular education student is \$15,266.50 and for each special education student is \$36,517.12.

**Q20. What is the average cost of educating a student in a Pocono Mountain School District school as compared to a charter school?**

Answer: For the 2018-2019 school year, the average cost of educating a district student attending a Pocono Mountain School District school was \$24,096 per student. The average cost to the Pocono Mountain School District for educating a district student attending a charter or cyber charter school in 2018-2019 was \$25,281.

**Q21. How much does Pocono Mountain School District currently pay to charter schools for students attending charter and cyber charter schools?**

Answer: Pocono Mountain School District estimates that it will pay approximately \$8,692,500 in tuition for students enrolled in charter and cyber-charter schools during the 2019-2020 school year.

**Q22. What charter school applications were submitted to Pocono Mountain School District during the 2019-2020 school year?**

Answer: Pocono Mountain School District has received two charter school applications. One application is for the proposed Pocono Charter High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, requesting to enroll students in grades 9 to 12, and the other application is for the proposed Summit Charter School, requesting to enroll students in grades Kindergarten to 12. Both charter applicants propose to open charter schools next school year, should the applications be granted.

**Q23. Why were the applications submitted to the Pocono Mountain School District (PMSD) Board of Education and Administration for review and approval?**

Answer: Although the school district cannot speak to the applicants' particular motivations, the PA Charter School Law requires potential charter school founders to submit their charter school applications to the local school district where the charter school will be located. The applicants have chosen to locate their charter schools in facilities within PMSD's boundaries. Applications

for new charter schools must be submitted to the school district by November 15 for schools that are proposed to open the following school year. Both applicants want to open charter schools starting in the 2020-2021 school year.

**Q24. What is the proposed enrollment for the Pocono Charter High School for the Performing and Visual Arts?**

Answer: The proposed Pocono Charter High School for the Performing and Visual Arts has submitted an application that includes a plan to open a charter school with 300 students in grades 9-12, and expand its enrollment to 590 students by year 5.

**Q25. In the charter application, what is the estimated total revenue to Pocono Charter High School for the Performing and Visual Arts for Pocono Mountain School District students to attend in year 1?**

Answer: The Pocono Charter High School for the Performing and Visual Arts' application predicts that it will cost Pocono Mountain School District \$5,536,250.85 in its first year of operation.

**Q26. What is the proposed enrollment for the Summit Charter School?**

Answer: The proposed Summit Charter School has submitted an application that includes a plan to open a charter school with 360 students in Kindergarten to 11<sup>th</sup> grade in its first year, expand its enrollment to 860 students by year 5, and ultimately enroll 1300 students by year 10.

**Q27. In the charter application, what is the estimated total revenue to Summit Charter School for Pocono Mountain School District students to attend in year 1?**

Answer: The Summit Charter School's application predicts that it will cost Pocono Mountain School District \$6,787,016 in its first year of operation.

**Q28. Does PMSD have to provide busing for students attending charter schools?**

Answer: School districts that offer transportation services must transport students to and from charter schools that are located within their district boundaries or within 10 miles of their borders, just as they do for private school students.