

**Comments by Dr. Elizabeth Robison,
Superintendent of Pocono Mountain School District**

**Present at Governor Wolf's Comprehensive Charter Reform Package
Press Conference**

**August 13, 2019
At Pocono Mountain West High School Library**

Thank you, Governor Wolf, for affording me this opportunity to join you in support of your new proposal for charter school reform. I am excited about the charter reform plan you just outlined here today. I hope this press conference marks a new beginning and the start of a new dialog on charter reform. *I hope with your energy behind this effort of charter reform, our legislators can work together to adopt much-needed and meaningful charter reform that will greatly benefit our students and taxpayers across the Commonwealth.*

When our legislators adopted the Charter School Law in 1997, it was to usher in an era of school choice for parents. What no one knew then was the unintended and profound impact the Charter School Law would have on our students and our taxpayers. As our Governor mentioned, many charter schools have strayed from the original purpose of the Charter School Law, consistently result in poor academic performance, and engage in questionable operational practices. *Charter reform is not just a big city school issue; it is an issue that impacts all public school districts, urban and rural.*

Pocono Mountain School District has a total of 473 students attending charter schools and cyber charter schools, 111 who attend brick-and-mortar charter schools, and 362 who attend cyber charter schools.

We are a bit unique from other school districts, because at one time we had another 338 students attending a charter school that had its charter revoked by the Pocono Mountain Board of Education in October, 2010, for egregious violations of the law and its operating charter. It took several more years to actually close the school, several years where millions of tax dollars

continued to flow into a charter school where children were being underserved and neglected educationally. When the school finally closed its doors, we found, that many, many of its students who returned to our District schools were so far behind their peers in our schools, they required extensive remediation and services that had been denied to them for years.

I was pleased to hear our Governor's proposal regarding increased accountability and transparency for charter schools. I can tell you from first-hand experience, the current process in place for a Chartering School District to hold a Charter School accountable to the terms and conditions listed in the PA Charter School Law and its own operating charter is a very costly process, both in actual dollars and in people hours. It is a very lengthy process that at times seems like there is no end in sight.

Our current PA Charter School Law allows for Chartering School Districts to have reasonable and ongoing access to Charter School records and schools as part of its oversight responsibilities. I again speak from personal experience when I say that the Chartering District many times has to go to extraordinary measures and expense to try to gain such access if a Charter School refuses to allow the access. This process needs to be streamlined to support the Chartering School Districts that are trying to fulfill their very important oversight responsibilities under the Law.

I firmly believe that Charter Schools should have to comply with the same standards and rules as traditional public schools. In the current era of increasing accountability in public education, it simply does not make sense to create different sets of rules: one set for Charter Schools and another set for traditional public schools. Both are funded by our taxpayers. Here are just some of the different rules/standards in place for Public Schools/Districts compared to Charter Schools:

- Public School Board Directors are elected. Charter Schools select Board members who are not even required to be residents of the chartering district.
- Public Schools have restrictions on the size of fund balances. There is no restriction on the size of the fund balance for Charter Schools.

- There is no clear “exit plan” for a charter school that voluntarily relinquishes its charter.
- Charter schools can insulate themselves from public scrutiny by establishing a not-for-profit foundation or similar entity that owns the school building.
- Charter schools can insulate themselves from public scrutiny by hiring management companies, many of which have close ties to charter school founders and foundation members.

While the Governor’s proposal announcement today does not include a specific recommendation for amending how charter schools are funding, it is my hope that when our legislators join together in a bi-partisan effort to reform the Charter School Law, they will realize that such reform will require a change to how the schools are funded and how tuition payments are calculated.

Tuition payments received by charter schools and cyber charter schools are taxpayer dollars that support students who are residents of the local school district. Tuition payments to charter and cyber charter schools are based upon the sending school district’s budget, not the actual operating cost of the charter or cyber charter school. This means, Pocono Mountain School District taxpayers pay much more to send students to a charter school than many other school districts.

The impact of funding Charter and Cyber Charter Schools on Pocono Mountain School District taxpayers has been tremendous, because our local property owners fund nearly 70 percent of the District’s annual operating costs through their property taxes.

Charter school funding for this District has increased annually by nearly \$1 million. Since 2002-2003, the actual cost per student for one regular education student attending a charter/cyber charter school has increased from \$5,724 to \$15,026 in 2018-2019. The cost for educating one special education student at a charter/cyber charter school has increased from \$9,999 in 2002-2003 to \$35,535 for 2018-2019. *Again, those tuition increases were automatic increases based upon the District’s budget and operating costs, not due to actual operating cost increases for the Charter or Cyber Charter Schools.* Compounding this problem is the fact that cyber schools

are funding at the same tuition rate as brick-and-mortar charter schools, which just does not make sense on any level. ***Also, the charter schools are not required to return any excess funds back to the sending school districts at the end of the year, which may be why they can afford to spend tens of thousands and some, hundreds of thousands, of dollars on advertising, something that the local taxpayers would never allow of their traditional public schools.***

While the amount of tax dollars going to fund Charter Schools and Cyber Charter Schools with very little real accountability or transparency in how the money is spent is certainly alarming, the impact many Charter Schools and Cyber Schools have had on our children should be of greater concern to everyone. Parents of Charter School and Cyber Charter School students really believe their children are achieving greater academically at the Charter Schools and Cyber Charter Schools in which they are enrolled, than they can achieve at local public schools. However, the School Performance Profile results show just the opposite. For Pocono Mountain School District students attending Charter Schools, most are attending Charter Schools that are underperforming academically compared to District schools. The Cyber School academic achievement results are even more alarming, as Cyber Schools continue to fail to meet even the most basic of academic standards established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

For many years there have been numerous revisions to the PA Charter School Law proposed by our state legislators. However, none of those revisions, to date, have been adopted by our legislators. Some of the proposals, while well-meaning, I firmly believe would have actually made it harder to improve Charter Schools, harder to hold Charter Schools accountable and impossible for School Districts to manage the financial impact of increases in tuition to Charter Schools and Cyber Schools. We need revisions to the law that address the real issues and very real concerns many of us have with how Charter Schools and Cyber Charter Schools are operating, their lack of accountability and transparency and with how they are funded in Pennsylvania.

Over the past 20 plus years, we have all learned a lot about what works and what isn't working with the Charter School Law. It's time to put that knowledge and research into action and reform the Charter School Law.

For many years our traditional public schools, such as our schools here at Pocono Mountain School District, have been blamed for every possible ill across the nation, yet we continue to quietly serve our students and to fight for a better today and tomorrow for our students.

Moving forward, our hope is we can do so in an environment where traditional public schools will have nothing to fear from school choice. We need school choice to become a fair and level playing field where all publically funded schools follow the same rules when it comes to educating our students and proving financial oversight and transparency of how taxpayer dollars are spent.

Governor Wolf thank you for making charter school reform a priority for your administration. Charter and Cyber Schools should have nothing to fear from sharing the same increased accountability and transparency that is expected and demanded of traditional public schools.

We owe it to the children who are attending Charter Schools and Cyber Charter Schools to ensure that their parents are being given a high-quality choice, not just a choice.

Thank You.