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PCCY issues Recommendations to Philadelphia School District Charter School Authorization Policy

PHILADELPHIA (March 11th, 2014) – Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) issued a series of recommendations to improve the Philadelphia School District’s charter school authorizing policy called the “Authorizing Quality Initiative.” PCCY commends the District and the SRC for creating a thoughtful and comprehensive set of policies for the approval of new and existing charter schools. However, the District and the SRC should accept a series of changes to all ten areas identified in the Authorizing Quality Initiative, especially in the areas of student enrollment, accountability, and the relationship between charter schools and the District, to truly create great schools that serve all of Philadelphia’s children.

“It’s especially useful that the District has crafted an authorizing approach that is reflective of the Philadelphia School District’s long experience as a charter authorizer and responsive to the lessons learned over nearly 20 years of this work in Philadelphia,” said Donna Cooper, Executive Director of PCCY. “To build on its vision, the District should develop clear language that defines high quality charters as schools that offer rigorous academic programs that make positive gains for all students.”

PCCY’s recommendations include:

On the approach in general:

The District’s approach for reviewing the academic, as well as fiscal, implications of authorizing charters shows a maturing of the review process and demonstrates a strong commitment to all students and to the prudent management of public resources.

Basic student supports are not in place in every charter. For instance, some charters do not offer their students access to federally subsidized free-or-reduced price meals. The District’s Charter Office should analyze charter school efforts to make these supports available and work with charters to ensure all students have access to vital student supports.

On charter school enrollment:

We strongly support the language that reads, “Consistent with its mission to allocate limited financial resources to all schools in Philadelphia, the SRC shall consider the financial impact of any application to create a new charter.”

Charters authorized by the SRC should have student bodies that reflect the diversity of students enrolled in the Philadelphia School District and ensure that no charter has illegal or inappropriate barriers to enrollment.

We recommend that the document include explicit language that makes clear that the approval of new or renewed charters must be based on the needs of all students enrolled in public

schools and that new charter seats will be identified from the pool of seats generated by non-renewal, revocation or termination of failing charters.

Priority consideration should be given to requests by charters that are seeking to expand their grade spans, if they are high performing and have a student body reflective of the concentration of at-risk students in the District. We recommend this approach because consistency of educational approach and relationships, where they are working, is in the best interest of students. Research shows that most students do not handle transitions well, so efforts to decrease transitions and shifts in educational approaches can have a positive effect on students and should be considered an important system improvement in the overall operation of the District/Charter partnership.

On Charter-Philadelphia School-District Relationship:

The clarity of the charter authorizing process is a useful step forward in ensuring that all charters are reviewed in a consistent manner and that the District is more actively creating a predictable environment for charter operators.

We recommend that the signed charter have explicit expectations of the District so that charters have clear, reasonable and enforceable expectations. We would suggest the inclusion of language such as timely release of school district payments to charters, a commitment to maintain consistent reporting requirements of the life of the charter, timely review of problems with the charter and reasonably quick decisions on the part of the district to solve charter payment and enrollment issues.

On charter school accountability measures:

We recommend that only those charters that are in the top tier – Exceeds Standards – be permitted to modify their charter for expansion.

The draft does not describe interim measures that can be imposed on charters where there is evidence of low performance. We recommend that the final policy include interim actions that can be taken to ensure that low performing charters improve so that revocation or termination can be avoided.

To read all of PCCY's comments on the Authorizing Quality Initiative, please visit:

<https://www.pccy.org/userfiles/file/Testimony/PCCY%20-%20Testimony%20-%20CharterPolicyComments.pdf>

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Founded in 1980, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY, www.pccy.org) is dedicated to improving the lives and life chances of children in the Delaware Valley. Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget and policy analysis, PCCY seeks to safeguard and speak out for the region's children. PCCY is an independent, non-profit organization.