

Testimony to the Philadelphia School Reform Commission

Charter School Applications

February 18, 2015

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Good afternoon.

My name is Carolyn Adams. I am a long-time faculty member at Temple University, a volunteer board member and immediate past president of Public Citizens for Children and Youth - an organization that has worked for over 30 years to improve the lives and life chances of children.

Last month, PCCY released a report outlining the legal, fiscal, and oversight challenges of granting new charters in Philadelphia. Many of the schools seeking to expand have fewer than half of their students on grade level. And compared to the district's student population, a majority of the charter applicants serve fewer low-income students and students who don't speak English as their first language. While we will continue to highlight these issues as they relate to access and equity for all children, we believe that the most urgent consideration to take into account today is the funding implications that any charter expansion would have for the district's students.

As you are well aware, conditions in the School District of Philadelphia have hit a historic low after four years of unprecedented state disinvestment in education. Students have borne the brunt of those cuts. Many of our current students have suffered when their school buildings closed, their teachers were laid off, their classes became overcrowded, or their schools eliminated sports, tutoring, and counseling services. Our students have done their best to get by in class sizes that diminish them, and in schools that have made national news for having supply budgets of less than \$100.

Advocates for expanding charters argue that the benefits of creating more charter seats outweigh the costs. But this is not a decision that can be based on a standard cost/benefit calculation. When we perform a benefit-cost calculation, we assume that the people gaining the benefits are the people who pay the costs. That is not the case in the decision that faces you. A decision to expand charters could produce benefits for a relatively small number of children, if they can secure a seat in a high-performing charter school. But the cost to achieve that benefit will be paid by a completely different group of children who remain in severely underfunded district schools.

The expansion of just one charter seat will result in a recurring bill to the district of \$7,000 per year for the life of the charter. While the district can avoid some costs when a student transfers to a charter, most of the overhead of operating the district schools remains the same. Any decision to expand charter schools today will result in a binding agreement in which the district is essentially “promising to pay” into the future. Given the district’s projected \$80 million deficit for next year, and lack of control over revenue, that is a decision that this body cannot make in good conscience.

If the Commission seriously believes it can expand charters without undermining district schools, that implies that it can find new funds to pay the additional costs. If that is true, then such additional funds could be invested in struggling traditional public schools that lack books, teachers and counselors, instead of new charter school seats.

There is hope for increased school funding, but it is not a promise that this body should use to decide Philadelphia students' futures. Our new governor and legislature were elected through the historic ousting of a sitting governor largely because of his sweeping education funding cuts. Unfortunately, while the lawmakers in Harrisburg are still unpacking their boxes, the School Reform Commission must decide whether to approve new charter schools and what cuts to impose on traditional schools to pay for charter expansion. I urge you to make the informed and difficult decision to reject all charter expansion today in light of the fiscal challenges that face us. PCCY will continue to work with parents, policy makers, and lawmakers to ensure that next year is better for all of our students—whether in traditional or charter schools.