

# public citizens for children + youth

## **RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF HB: 526 (CYBER CHARTER REFORM)**

### **TESTIMONY**

Philadelphia City Council  
October 29, 2020  
Tomea Sippio-Smith  
K-12 Education Policy Director

Thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning.

I'm here today in support of Resolution No. 200580.

I'm calling on City Council to show its support for House Bill 526, which calls for ending the use of taxpayer funds to pay for cyber charter education when local school districts offer their own fulltime cyber school programs. Supporting this bill is a fiscally responsible, common sense option for Philadelphia.

By championing HB 526, sponsored by the Republican House Education Chair, Curt Sonney, City Council is taking a step back from the biting, ultra-polarized rhetoric that currently plagues our political system. Instead, by showing its support for this Republican bill, the Council is moving toward a bi-partisan solution to fix a significant part of Pennsylvania's badly broken charter school law – cyber charters– an overhaul that is nearly 20 years past due.

Like 90% of the state's districts, the school district of Philadelphia offers an in-house cyber program for students. Unlike other school districts, Philadelphia spent a whopping \$106 million in cyber charter tuition during the 2018-2019 school year. And thanks to a jump in enrollment by more than 1,200 students this year alone, that amount is expected to grow by \$15 million dollars. That's an unacceptable jump in a year when school districts across the state are expected to face millions of dollars of increases in mandates, shortfalls in local revenue and significant costs related to Covid.



For the amount of money the school district is pouring into cyber charters, one would expect a strong return on investment. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. Cyber charters have never delivered on that expectation.

Nearly 19,000 students attending cyber charters are performing worse on state assessments than students attending schools in the School District of Philadelphia. For instance, if you look just at math performance, 83% of the students are attending cyber charter schools where the overall performance is worse than that of students in the Philadelphia School district.

While abysmal, this is unsurprising considering that the Credo Study from Stanford University just last year found that Pennsylvania students attending cyber charters had learning gaps equal to 106 less days in reading and 118 fewer days in math compared to their peers in traditional public schools.

Philadelphia's students deserve better.

Again, we are not asking City Council to pass a law. We are calling on Harrisburg to do that. The state will have to implement processes that address the transitional needs of children and ensure the continuity of their education. We are asking City Council to *tell* Harrisburg that the current cyber charter school law and the way that we are funding cybers is not working for students or taxpayers.

But enough is enough. Continuing to mandate that the district pays for failing cyber charter schools when the School District of Philadelphia offers a full-time cyber education program is not necessary and places an unreasonable financial burden on the School District of Philadelphia and local taxpayers.

Passing this resolution to support HB 526 simply makes financial and common sense. Do the right thing for taxpayers and the school district. Pass the resolution supporting HB 526.