

**Testimony to the School District of Philadelphia Board of Education at the  
Special Action Meeting to Consider Three Applications for New Charter Schools**

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Good afternoon. I am Symbol Lai, Philadelphia Mobilization and Policy Director at Children First. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the applications pending before this body to authorize new charter schools.

First and foremost, Children First and the PA Charter Performance Center advocate for every student to be enrolled in a high-quality school. Currently, nearly 80,000 students attend charter schools in Philadelphia. Some are enrolled in charters performing on par with the District but far too many are enrolled in poorly performing charter schools. If the Board of Education chooses to authorize new charter school seats, the schools must offer high quality options for students. To that end, if new charter school seats are authorized, the Board should proportionally reduce the seats in poorly performing schools to improve overall school quality.

Accordingly, we have concerns about two of the applications submitted. Specifically, we oppose the application to create the Philadelphia Entrepreneurial Development Academy Charter High School and regretfully, oppose the application for the Bilingual Business, Finance and Technology Charter High School.

Firstly, the application for Philadelphia Entrepreneurial Development Academy Charter High School is missing key information about its ability to support student success.

Neither the lead applicant, nor the board has significant experience in the field of education. Additionally, neither the lead applicant, nor any of the listed board members have operated a charter school. Absent this information, it is impossible to fully assess the applicant's ability to provide comprehensive learning experiences that will enable students to meet academic standards or address their educational needs.

Second, it is unclear how the proposed entrepreneurial model for the school will translate into a solid educational program. Of note, the application speaks to the performance of and gap in test scores between Philadelphia's students and students in neighboring suburban school districts. Yet, it offers little specific information as to how this school seeks to close performance gaps on these measures or gaps in overall academic achievement. This is greatly concerning since the stated purpose of the school is to "educate all students to the highest levels of academic achievement, to enable them to reach and expand their potential." Without additional, concrete information about how the school will specifically address these gaps, it is again difficult to envision how this school will meet its students' academic needs.

Finally, the applicant proposes to enter into a contract for substantial educational management services with Omnivest, a corporation that has had ties with at least 14 local charter schools. Many schools affiliated with Omnivest have been the focus of fraud investigations and/or other scandals. Moreover, the charters for several have been non-renewed or closed such as New Media Technology High School, Imani Charter School and the Khepera Academy Charter School. Several others have been cited for numerous violations. Clearly, this is of grave concern, and we cannot support the opening of additional schools given this track record.

In addition, we regretfully oppose ASPIRA's proposal to create the Bilingual Business, Finance and Technology Charter High School. As stated on numerous occasions, Children First respects ASPIRA's commitment to equitable access to a quality education for all students, especially to students that identify as Hispanic or English Language Learners. We recognize that many of the schools that ASPIRA operates are performing at or above the level of their peers.

However, ASPIRA students in grades 9-12 have not performed as well as students in peer schools and we cannot recommend the opening of a new high school at this time.

Of course, the members of the Board of Education are the ultimate decision makers. Children First and the PA Charter Performance Center support high quality schools. If the Board authorizes new seats or opens new charter schools, they should be high quality options for students. Moreover, we encourage you to continue to shut down poorly performing schools. Finally, we implore you not to authorize any seats that will result in a net increase in total charter school seats in a way that would negatively affect the availability of funding to educate students attending schools operated directly by the District.