COMMENTS OPPOSING THE CHALLENGEU CYBER CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATION

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My name is ML Wernecke and I am the Director of the PA Charter Performance Center, an initiative of Children First, the child advocacy organization formerly known as PCCY. The PA Charter Performance Center is committed to producing unbiased, accurate, and timely information to advance sound state-level charter school policy.

The proponents of the ChallengeU Cyber Charter School (ChallengeU) outline plans to create a cyber charter specifically for high school overage and under-credited adolescents who have dropped out or are at-risk of dropping out to prepare them to pursue post-graduation opportunities. Their thoughtful application recognizes that many students "disengage from school due to life pressures such as the need to work to support their families" or "care for young children and other family members."

Students enrolled in a Pennsylvania cyber charter, including ChallengeU, must receive a minimum of 990 hours of instruction per year at the secondary level under PA Charter School Law (§ 4.4. General policies. 22 Pa. Code Ch.4 (relating to academic standards and assessment)). This inflexible, full-time only policy undermines ChallengeU's model. Many if not most of the students ChallengeU is targeting for enrollment have already demonstrated significant barriers to attending school on a full-time basis. Full-time cyber charter studies is the wrong solution for a teen mom attempting to care for an infant or for a student who is working at or close to full-time to pay family bills.

The application references ChallengeU's programs in Canada and Virginia as proof it will meet academic standards. These examples are not relevant because neither program uses the full-time model proposed for Pennsylvania.

ChallengeU in Canada is a program, not a school, and does not require full-time enrollment. Students can enroll in a course Math, French and English. In fact, ChallengeU advises students to take one course at a time because it will allow them to progress more quickly (https://www.challengeu.ca/).

ChallengeU's Virginia pilot project is a part-time dropout recovery program structured as a partnership with school districts (https://www.challengeu.com/parent). This model may be a good idea but it is fundamentally different that operating a full-time cyber charter and cannot be used as proof of its ability to provide comprehensive learning experience or enable students to meet academic standards as required by PA Charter School Law.

The four year graduation rate for Pennsylvania's existing cyber charter schools ranges from 41% to 84% with a median graduation rate of 57%. ChallengeU sets an academic goal that 60% of high school seniors will graduate within one year of enrolling in ChallengeU PCCS in year 1 and 70% by year 5. Given that ChallengeU will largely or completely enroll overage and under-credited students with more barriers to full-time education, it is unlikely to outperform existing cyber charters.

In short, ChallengeU builds a case for a part-time, credit-based program, not a full-time cyber charter school. Because the applicant is unlikely to be able to provide comprehensive learning experiences or meet academic standards as required under PA Charter School Law, we urge you to reject this application.