



**COMMENTS OPPOSING THE PENNWOOD CYBER CHARTER SCHOOL
APPLICATION**

**Pennsylvania Department of Education
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Director, PA Charter Performance Center**

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 Pennwood Cyber Charter School Board deserves credit for submitting a highly detailed application that establishes ambitious goals. Pennwood's ability to meet these goals, however, will depend on the performance of its educational services provider, Pearson Virtual Schools (Pearson). Pearson was referenced 138 times in the application and will be responsible for curriculum and instructional supports, operating the education management system, teacher training and coaching, managing social and emotional learning supports, developing and implementing a special education program, producing financial reports, managing enrollment, human resources, technology, marketing, and maintaining a partnership with Drexel University. Pearson is also providing a start up grant that, according to the Pennwood Board, is not expected to be repaid.

In short, if the application is approved, Pennwood will hold the charter but Pearson will run the school.




Section 17-1745-A of Pennsylvania's Charter School Law requires the Department to evaluate "the extent to which the programs outlined in the application will enable students to meet the academic standards under 22 Pa. Code Ch. 4

(relating to academic standards and assessment).” Pearson’s recent performance running two other Pennsylvania cybers provides compelling evidence that Pennwood will not meet the academic goals set in its application.

Two Pennsylvania cyber charters currently or recently contracted with Pearson. In its 2020-21 report to the Department, Reach Cyber Charter School describes a comprehensive contract with Pearson similar to the scope outlined in the Pennwood application. In addition, 990 filings from Commonwealth Charter Academy, now known as CCA, show contracts averaging \$41 million a year with Pearson or its Connections Academy affiliate from 2012 to 2018. In short, these two cyber charters are good predictors of Pennwood’s ability to meet academic standards as required under PA Charter School Law.

Academics: Pennwood set a goal of 100% of the state average on the PSSA and Keystone exams. The reality is Pennwood’s goal for English is 1.6 times the actual proficiency rates for Reach and over 12 times the rate for CCA. Similarly, Pennwood’s goal for math is more than three times higher than the proficiency rate for both Reach and CCA. There is insufficient evidence that badging or a C-term as proposed by Pennwood will close this huge performance gap.

Testing: Pennwood also claims that 95% of its student will participate in assessment tests versus the actual testing rates by Reach (10.4%) and CCA (5.1%) in the 2021 school year. As with academic targets, the goal is out of reach.

			
Percent proficient or advanced in English, 2018-19*	62.1%	38.2%	5.0%
Percent proficient or advanced in Math, 2018-19*	100%	14.2%	13.5%
Percent Test Participation, all students, 2020-21	95%	10.4%	5.1%

*Due to low testing rates, the 2018-19 school year is the most recent year of validated assessment data. Pennwood proficiency targets based on 2018-19 data.

It is not sufficient for Pennwood to perform only as well as Reach and CCA. There is ample evidence that cyber charters have a profound and negative impact on student achievement, including the fact that every one of the state's cyber charters, including those that rely on Pearson as their educational service provider, need additional support under the state's ESSA School Improvement and Accountability plan. By doubling down on Pearson, 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.