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April 26, 2017

School Reform Commission, School District of Philadelphia
Joyce S. Wilkerson, Chair
William J. Green
Farah Jimenez
Dr. Christopher McGinley

Dear Commissioners:

We write to you in reference to SRC Resolution B-4 on alternative education programs, due to be voted on tomorrow, April 27, 2017. **We urge the Commission to postpone consideration of the Camelot contract to allow additional time for review and discussion. We also write to raise significant concerns about the multi-year charter school renewals scheduled for a vote.**

Camelot – SRC Resolution B-4

First, with regard to Camelot, we are deeply concerned about their highly regimented and restrictive policies, practices, and school environment that re-traumatize students rather than support their engagement and learning. As reflected in a recent *Pro Publica* article regarding Camelot schools nationwide,¹ students in various Camelot school programs across the country have been subjected to abuse by staff and often felt “powerless to complain” because school leaders typically condoned the behavior. Clearly, this environment is the antithesis of positive school-wide behavior support and restorative justice practices that we know are most effective for children and youth. Second, we are concerned about the qualifications of teachers at Camelot schools and the lack of accountability for highly- mobile students served by Camelot programs. Accordingly, we ask that you delay this vote to allow for a reasonable time period for public review and comment.

Multi-year charter renewals

In addition, we also urge the SRC to postpone the scheduled vote on 26 multi-year charter school renewals as these renewals raise significant concerns and represent a substantial cost to the School District. And yet, proceeding with a vote will permit the public only a week to review nearly 800 pages of charter evaluation reports (which does not even include the still-unavailable reports for five of the charter schools now under consideration). Based on our extensive experience representing students in charter schools and our review of data issued by the School District of Philadelphia’s Charter School Office, we know that many vulnerable student populations are denied access to these schools with no repercussions or accountability. For example, some Philadelphia Charter schools serve no English Language Learners at all, despite the fact that their immediate neighborhood includes a high percentage of limited English proficient students. Also, these schools often turn away children with significant disabilities. For example, a parent of a child with Down Syndrome was told by one charter school that her child “*just wouldn’t fit in*” and in another situation, a parent of child with autism was told that the charter school “*has never educated any child like this and*

¹ See Sarah Carr, et al., *These For-Profit Schools Are ‘Like a Prison,’* PRO PUBLICA, Mar. 8, 2017, available at <https://www.propublica.org/article/these-for-profit-schools-are-like-a-prison>

wouldn't know where to begin to try to meet the child's needs." In another case, a child with a disability was educated alone in a single classroom at her charter school. The Education Law Center's recent report, *Inequities in Pennsylvania's Charter Sector: Segregation by Disability*, explains the disturbing result of disparate funding mechanisms that result in a perverse incentive for charter schools to underserve students with more severe disabilities and the segregation of our schools by disability and race.²

Finally, many charter schools simply fail their students year after year and yet are permitted to continue to operate, only to fail more students. For example, a charter school that has operated for 10 years has a horrible track record of poor academic performance – with Math proficiency rates hovering at 4%. As one parent explained, *"I had no idea that my two children were performing so far below grade level. They both received straight As at the charter school. I was told at Parent-Teacher conferences that they were excelling. I thought they would both get scholarships to college. I was told to pay no attention to the standardized tests – they didn't matter – what matters are grades. Some charter schools know exactly how to tell you what you really want to hear."*

We urge the SRC to take the time to carefully consider each charter school renewal with reference to their demonstrated commitment to effectively serve all children.

Sincerely,

Deborah Gordon Klehr, Esq., Executive Director
Education Law Center-PA

Cc: Superintendent Hite, School District of Philadelphia

² See ELC Analysis: *Inequities in Pennsylvania's Charter Sector: Segregation by Disability*, February 2017, available at <http://www.elc-pa.org/resource/inequities-in-pennsylvanias-charter-sector-segregation-by-disability/>