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Education Law Center Applauds Gov. Wolf's Call for Charter Reform

Statement from Reynelle Brown Staley, policy director, Education Law Center

“Gov. Wolf is preparing to introduce regulations and propose new legislation governing the state’s charter schools. The Education Law Center shares his sense of urgency in addressing the issues of poor academic performance, equity concerns, and rapidly growing costs of charters. We look forward to working with state officials to implement regulatory and legislative changes that rectify these problems.

“As an organization dedicated to ensuring the educational rights of all students in Pennsylvania’s public schools, we have repeatedly warned about the lack of adequate oversight and accountability tools to protect Pennsylvania students in the charter sector from unfair and discriminatory treatment.

“Our recent [study](#) of Philadelphia charter schools found that the city’s traditional “brick-and-mortar” charter schools are not sharing equitably in the responsibility of educating all students. For example, they serve significantly fewer English learners than district schools, their population is less economically disadvantaged, and fewer of their students receiving special education require higher-cost aids and services. The result is that district and charter schools do not compete on a level playing field, and far from fulfilling their goal of providing educational alternatives to underserved student groups, charters are not equitably serving these students. We know that many of these [same issues](#) have arisen in districts across the state. We are encouraged that Gov. Wolf is committed to developing new regulations that ensure non-discriminatory charter school admissions and enrollment policies.

“Gov. Wolf’s plan also addresses a number of longstanding problems with the financing of charter schools that demand state attention. For example, funding for cyber charters and for special education services in charters bears little relationship to the actual costs of educating students in those programs. We endorse the governor’s call for greater accountability and transparency around charter school finances. We are hopeful that Gov. Wolf can put an end to some of these egregiously unfair financial practices in the charter sector.

“Many of Pennsylvania’s charter schools are located in school districts that are woefully underfunded by the state. Charter schools are not at all immune to the effects of this underfunding. But the appropriate remedy is not for charter schools to unfairly cannibalize the financial resources of traditional public schools in their district. Charter schools should join in statewide efforts to increase the state’s funding of basic and special education, directed to the students and school districts with the greatest educational needs.”

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The Education Law Center-PA (ELC) is a nonprofit, legal advocacy organization with offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, dedicated to ensuring that all children in Pennsylvania have access to a quality public education. Through legal representation, impact litigation, trainings, and policy advocacy, ELC advances the rights of underserved children, including children living in poverty, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children with disabilities, English learners, LGBTQ students, and children experiencing homelessness.