

John F. Swoyer III, Chief Executive Officer – MaST Community Charter School

Testimony before the Auditor General, Eugene DePasquale

Good Afternoon, My name is John Swoyer and I am the CEO at MaST Community Charter School (Math, Science, and Technology Community Charter School). Our Board President and Founder, Karen DelGuercio, envisioned a public charter school that developed innovative thinkers and a state-of-the-art environment throughout our organization including our teachers, administrators, and most importantly, our students. MaST focuses on raising the bar in education and interaction in the classroom through a variety of resources and creative initiatives under the umbrella of STREAM (Science, Technology, Robotics, Engineering, Arts, and Math) centered education. We prepare students to be well-rounded individuals for the next level of their careers. 94 percent of our students went to college last year with over 7 million dollars in scholarship money.

In speaking today, I can honestly tell you I am proud to be the leader of MaST, one of the highest performing and academically challenging institutions in the Tri-State area. We are a charter school, which means that we have a unique focus that offers students learning opportunities that they may not have in a district public school. Since we are a K-12 environment, this means that there are many levels of cross-curricular experiences that don't occur in a school district. We educate every child that comes through our doors regardless of their educational, financial, or societal background via the yearly lottery.

Over the past 10 years at MaST, I have held many different titles and during that time, I have witnessed our program grow as a leader in innovation and project-based learning. Our teachers know our students and follow them throughout their careers at MaST due to our unique

K-12 pathway. The size and structure of the school is one of a family which allows our students to feel comfortable learning in our environment. Our performance has shown that we can compete with the best and wealthiest school districts in PA. We don't have central office interference or hierarchies of levels like a district, and because of this, we are able, with our Board of Trustees, to assess our programs and make adaptations so that ALL of our students benefit in the learning process.

The analogy of "Charters and Districts" is much like the freshman that has just arrived on campus and is challenging the senior for the starting role on the team because he can offer something successful, new and unique. That being said, districts need to open their thinking to allow "new and unique" into their educational arena and welcome charter schools as new players in the game.

The unfortunate reality is that when district Boards authorize and oversee charters, there are no consistent, realistic guidelines for evaluation and cooperation because at the end of the day we are both competitors and teammates in the same arena. Due to this relationship, we all become part of a larger organization with the same goal in mind.....educating the children of that community. So instead of being seen as an opposing team, we should be viewed for the various strengths that we bring to the arena.

Charters in Philadelphia are underfunded in comparison to the district, operating on 75% of the money allocated to each attending child, while the district receives the remaining 25% of payment. Despite that fact, some charters are becoming highly desired based on their success. MaST is a prime example of a model parents want for their children with over 5300 applications from Philadelphia residents this year alone. Many school districts make the point that charters

are taking money out of the district, but I would argue that the money is following the child to create an alternative, educational, option that the parent is choosing. That same district isn't complaining that they get money from every resident in a school district (even if they attend a private or Catholic Schools). This argument is saying that the taxpayer's money belongs to the district when in fact the district is empowered as the distributor and the decision maker of that money. This is not a good combination for oversight and can often cause false rumors.

Therefore, when looking at oversight, I challenge you to look at charters and districts in a simple way, as equal opportunity, educational institutions. If they are successful, desired by parents in great numbers and serve an aspect that the district cannot provide, consider developing and expanding them. IF THEY ARE FAILING or have corruption within and are not performing, hand them to operators who will transform them into successful educational models.

The Perception of Charter Schools is Driven By a Self-Created Reality

Oversight starts at the top of any organization, both charter and district. Unlike the schools in a district, EVERY charter school is its own separate entity, however, it is clear that the reputation of ALL charters is put at stake every time there is an issue.

Charter schools were originally started to offer an alternative to traditional public education, each being its own separate entity, governed by a Board, with an educational focus for fostering successful students. Unfortunately, every time there is a headline; **every** charter is grouped into the message or the dialogue. I'm sure you have heard these common misconceptions about ALL charters, **"Charters - they are destroying districts, sucking funds out of the system, Charters - they can choose their own students, Charters - they don't have to hire qualified teachers, Charters- they are not held accountable for academic performance, Charters- they operate without any oversight "**. Ironically, when something

happens in a district, you look to the **specific** school and the leadership of that individual school, not the district as a whole. On the other hand, when an incident happens in an individual charter school, **all** charter schools come into focus.

Recently, I was listening to a show on the radio and they spoke about how charters have failed the system. I thought to myself, **our** charter school is ranked in the top 30 state schools, has 40 percent higher science scores than Neshaminy, a district that rejected our charter application, and has a wait list in Philadelphia of over 5300 students who long to attend MaST. So, why has MaST “failed the system”? We haven’t, but everyone listening to that radio station now has that impression.

My personal feeling is that every public school, district or charter needs to have the ability to be evaluated and funded properly. If the taxpayers are calling for alternatives, maybe school districts need to be open to the idea of partnerships. Why can’t a MaST Model help a traditional school district while creating a cost savings to the district for something it currently doesn’t have or for which they outsource funds? I can only speak to my experience, but I have heard of many stories regarding mismanagement of funds due to the lack of oversight in a local school district, yet they remain in a good light in the public eye. If this happened in a charter school, the media would be calling for the closing of the charter, the CEO’s job, and a total restructuring. Instead, this area district is now spending upwards of 90 million dollars on a high school renovation.

MaST has 5,342 students on its waiting list for next year in Philadelphia. We only are able to admit 96 students because we are capped at 1250 students in Philadelphia. We are attempting to expand in Philadelphia and outside of Philadelphia into Bucks County, but we are told that due to financial constraints we are currently frozen or that the Bucks County District

needs to “evaluate how one charter affects their functions.” Last year, MaST had 5,782 applications for its Philadelphia school so this is not a fluke. The number has decreased from last year because we deleted a few hundred applications because parents are applying when their children are 2 and 3 years of age. This shows the desperation for an alternative education for area families.

There is this myth that charter schools are not wanted in Bucks County. We applied for a charter in Neshaminy School District and are currently in appeal with the Commonwealth. We had over 600 parents pre-enroll their children and we didn’t even have a school or building. We had over 1300 signatures from Neshaminy residents, but we have been given multiple reasons by the district that our charter was rejected with one of the reasons being that the district was “seeing how it would affect their finances with one other charter in their district.” Parents would tell you that MaST outperformed Neshaminy School District in 10 of their 12 schools with almost an identical Title I population. This isn’t about MaST in Neshaminy; Charter Schools are public schools and that could offer great opportunities to students who might get lost in a district with thousands of children. These students would do well in a smaller, innovative environment.

One thing that we practice at MaST is looking at the whole child and creating an individual education plan that really fits the variety of learning for every child. Should a parent whose child thinks differently, needs more resources, has a special interest or benefits from a smaller educational community, not have the opportunity to attend an environment where they will excel? MaST has 100 percent certified teaching staff, 5 AP course offerings, 100 percent graduation rate, 70 extracurricular opportunities, and has been able to operate on about 80/85 percent of the dollars, is ranked a top 30 school in PA, and ranked a top charter in Philadelphia. We are exemplary stewards of taxpayer dollars. How is it possible that a school like this be rejected twice in the failing Bensalem School District (Bucks County) and Neshaminy School

District? Is there a problem with oversight into the charter approval process? Do the authorizers consider the wrong factors when charter schools are evaluated? Are failing schools not shut down allowing low performing seats to linger in the system?

In closing, I believe charter schools can make a difference. Charter Schools offer something unique, there are many models and they should have the chance to be funded properly. The oversight process needs to take some accountability for creating a backbone to grow successful models and identify places where charter schools can really impact education. Oversight systems have been put into place via PIMS and both independent and state financial audits have enough information that exists for all schools to be evaluated equally. There needs to be an open mind to the idea that charter schools have a place in the educational arena, that they operate and run programs with less money than districts, but maybe the most important fact is that there is a large demand and not enough supply in many areas of PA.