

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

Testimony at City Hall - Senator Browne and Members of the Basic Funding Commission Committee

Good Morning Senator Browne, Representative Vereb, and the Basic Funding Commission, 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 throughout our organization including our teachers, administrators, and most importantly, our students. As an educational and visionary leader, MaST has always strived to create the most innovative and state-of-the-art environment for students, parents, and teachers. MaST focuses on raising the bar in education and interaction in the classroom through a variety of resources, out-of-the-box initiatives, and unconventional instructional approaches. Many in the outside community believe that MaST must be funded through donations in order to provide such rich resources to children, but in reality, MaST receives very little in donations. Rather, MaST is an example of using the dollars received with the best purpose in mind.

MaST prepares students to be well rounded citizens who are ready for the next level of learning. Our performance has shown that we can compete with the best and wealthiest school districts in Pennsylvania. We don't have a central office or the hierarchies of levels like a district; rather, we have flexibility which allows us to test and experiment with new educational practices, techniques, and technologies. As a K-12 institution, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to watch our students grow from when they come into our program until the time they graduate. We lose very few students from year to year, which is why we have such a strong and committed school community who consistently help contribute to our success.

MaST Learning Environment

In speaking today, I can honestly tell you I am proud to be the leader at MaST, one of the highest performing and academically innovative institutions in America. We look at ourselves as a “charter school,” which provides a public education through a unique mission for students who may not fit into a normal district public school. MaST focuses on STREAM education (Science, Technology, Robotics, Engineering, Arts, and Math). STREAM means a curriculum that embeds new trends and technology while providing students with interactive approaches to learning. If you walked into MaST, you would see a Media Center, where student learning is enhanced with technology such as books that can be displayed on the floor with animations and sound. You would see learning through our Lego Robotics K-8 program, a hands-on approach to STEM education. You would see a Makerspace that we designed and built in-house with money our parents helped to raise. The Makerspace is a hub for creativity and design that over 400 high school students get to use every day. The space is the home to visual design, game design, engineering, robotics, 3D printing, motion capture, and an open workspace for students after school. These are just a few things that MaST has been able to do with less money per child than a district school.

Some of our school highlights proving our success include:

- Our application process, which starts over every October and runs until January 31st, has had over 5,300 people apply each of the past two years.
- This year (since October 1st), MaST has 5,608 applications in the first 47 days.
- Each year, we have about 130 seats open. This is less than 1% of the hopeful applicants accepted into MaST each year.
- 94% of our students go on to college or vocational programs when they graduate.
- Last year our graduation class had 6.8 million dollars in scholarships and 5 of our students were accepted to the University of Pennsylvania.
- 100 percent graduation rate / Many students in PA colleges.

- MaST educates over 175 special education students, 31 ELL students, and is a school-wide Title I program. MaST has 100 percent certified staff, offers over 60 extra-curricular activities, and 5 AP courses.
- MaST was recently named an Apple Distinguished School.

With all of this being said, the question I ask today is will MaST be able to sustain our programs without fair funding enhancements?

Affordability

MaST has streamlined its operations and has been a good steward of the taxpayer money received for each child. We are a prime example of how the management of dollars can lead to: resources for students and teachers, a system of creativity and collaboration within an ecosystem, and an overall more efficient model to run. However, resources that are taken from charters, who are already receiving at least 80% less per child, will eventually destroy even the most successful of models in Philadelphia. MaST was forced to use its savings and fund balance to the tune of \$800,000 to balance its budget last year. We believe that despite our effort to make cuts to balance our budgets each year, we will be forced to continue using fund balance as our revenues decrease. You can only cut so much from your program before you start taking away components that are essential to your students.

If you look at the performance of charters and subtract the magnet and select admission schools from the data, you would see that charter schools are performing at the highest level without being able to select their children. This explains why there is such a great demand by parents who understand what public education means to people wanting to live and work in Philadelphia.

This is only one angle of the debate, because charter schools offer so much more and many of them have specialized functions that can be applied to a population who wouldn't benefit from a traditional public school. There is a strong reason to fund charters and there is also a model that districts can learn from with regards to saving money. Examples of this can

been seen in the ability for MaST to schedule with dual-certified teachers. This requires fewer teachers and they can teach across different grade levels using block scheduling. MaST had the ability to apply for alternate pension plans and use that as a money saving resource for any new hires. Finally, MaST is not a top heavy school with regards to their administration, but rather MaST utilizes every resource possible from people within the organization. As a school, MaST is eager to grow in Philadelphia, but we need a fair funding formula across all schools and this means equal money for every child who is funded by public dollars. Charters are public schools and funded through taxpayers, therefore, there shouldn't be such an imbalance when it comes to funding.

MaST strives to be a leader in innovation and project-based learning and is willing to help other schools accomplish the same success. We are in an area where parents want good schools and they want choices that will challenge their children. Fair funding is the key to all schools growing and sustaining their models. MaST has a population of 1250 students in Philadelphia and lost the PSERS reimbursement which originally was an offset for lack of facilities funding. Now we have neither. We sustained over **2 million dollars** in funding cuts overnight last year. Between the district subsidy cuts the past few years, charter school operators have felt the hurt more than district schools. Many of us have bonds for our buildings because sustainability in the long-term for charters is about owning our facility or having good long-term debt. The authorizing of a charter every 5 years is a difficult process that is currently being handled by the School District of Philadelphia and their 6-person office. Although MaST recently went through the process and received accolades by the district, bondholders watch charters lose funding, see a 5 year renewal, and they are hesitant when it comes to the sustainability in Philadelphia. Because charters are not eligible for Plan-Con or any facility funding, bonds are often the only source for buildings.

In addition to paying down debt, MaST has maintained a state-of-the-art facility in NE Philadelphia and receives no facility money to do so. MaST has a waitlist in Philadelphia of over

5,600 students, has a very high bond rating, has a great academic reputation, and yet I have received multiple calls from the bondholders about our future in Philadelphia and our ability to sustain our program. This statement alone means that we need to review funding and look for fair funding options that give every child an equal ability to be funded in any school that they choose to attend. The system in Philadelphia has been broken for a long time and it is time that a few things be reviewed and understood:

- 1) The funding formula - More education dollars for all schools but look at each system as a different option for children and fund equitably.
- 2) Charters as part of the funding process (like successful districts that have implemented funding that is formulated as part of the process).
- 3) The funding following the child in Philadelphia. Equal funding formulas mean that there is a formula where charter schools as well as district schools are funded with proper oversight. This means planning for charter school growth in the future with options for children to excel in a collaborative district / charter partnership.
- 4) **Bottom line:** It is time to fund education as a whole and ensure that every student in PA is funded equally.
- 5) Charter school funding cannot continue to operate with significantly fewer dollars per child and whether that is 75% or 80% based on your calculation it is still less per child than district schools for educating the same child.
- 6) Although charters have survived last year's cuts, most do not have a large enough reserve to survive for more than a few years. Lacking the ability to raise taxes, charters must save judiciously to remain open with successful programs. There are several models that may or may not fit Pennsylvania, but the current model does not meet the needs of children and must be modified for the future of education.

We have to provide solutions for the issue we are speaking on today and we have to think about the most important piece of the puzzle of education - the students. Thinking back to the question I asked earlier about MaST and other models sustaining their programs without fair funding enhancements; the answer would be NO. This is why the commission work at this time is so important to the entire Pennsylvania educational landscape.