

From the Office of the Chief Executive Officer

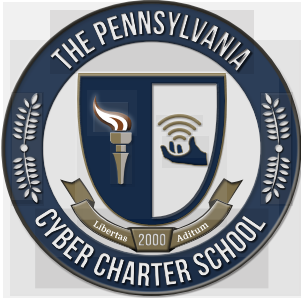
Hello, my name is Brian Hayden and I am the CEO of the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School. On behalf of The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School's 10,000 students and their families as well as our 825 employees, I would like to welcome you to Beaver County, which we proudly call home. Just a few miles down the road we are headquartered in the Borough of Midland, a former steel town where we now employ 278 people with a total of 369 living in the county and a local payroll of \$32 million. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania ranks PA Cyber as the 13th largest employer in Beaver County, right behind Shell Chemical, LP. In addition to being an important segment of public education, we are also a significant employer in Beaver County and the region.

At PA Cyber, we say that the learning never stops. In our twenty-third year of online teaching and learning, we are one of the oldest and most experienced cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania and the United States. We are proud of the work we do every day to ensure that every student has the best opportunity to succeed in the classroom, the community, and after graduating high school. Unfortunately, there are those who want to convince you otherwise: that we are greedy, uncaring, and provide a poor education that does not prepare students for the future. I am here to tell you that there is no truth to that.

I would like to take a few minutes to share PA Cyber's origin story. As the steel industry shuttered mills in the 1980s, Midland Boro School District was forced to close its high school due to declining enrollment and tax base. Initially, these students were sent to a neighboring district, but after three years that district ended the agreement, largely because of racial and socio-economic conflicts. None of the other county schools were willing to educate Midland students, so they were tuitioned to East Liverpool, Ohio. When the state passed its charter law, Midland's leaders saw founding a cyber charter school was a way to bring its students home to Pennsylvania. Since that time, PA Cyber has been a leader in virtual education, not only in the classroom but in the ways we support, mentor, and engage with our students.

Today, we are especially proud of the school community we have created. Throughout September I traveled to our nine regional offices across the Commonwealth, meeting over a thousand of our students and their families. At each stop, I heard wonderful stories of the ways in which PA Cyber has made school and life better for our students.

I would like the members of these committees to understand that we are a comprehensive school, not just math on a screen. Our families rightfully expect a full school experience, both in and out of the classroom. And we provide that experience. This is why HB 1422 is so troubling to our school. This legislation, which was rushed through the House without any real opportunity for us to comment or respond, irresponsibly characterizes cyber charter schools

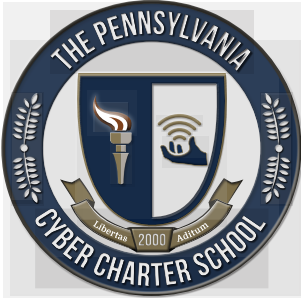


From the Office of the Chief Executive Officer

in ways that do not reflect the current charter law or reality. Any effort to find common ground on reform must be rooted in a shared set of facts, and in the past, there has been a significant disconnect between the perception of cyber charter schools and the reality of cyber charter schools. Each and every time an organization, a news outlet, a trade association, or an elected official misrepresents the reality of cyber charter schools, the discourse needed to create meaningful reform is harmed. We, as cyber school educators, accept some of the responsibility for these misconceptions being so prevalent as we have clearly not been as effective as we need to be in educating policy makers and the general public on how we operate. But I would suggest that the blame is equally shared by those that make unfounded statements and accusations about cyber charter schools in an effort to sway public opinion. In order to dispel some of the most common misconceptions about cyber charter schools, let me state the following:

We are not private schools as some of stated; we are public schools and as such do not “charge tuition” as some have said. These reimbursements are calculated by each of Pennsylvania’s 500 public school districts and reflect the investments their taxpayers make in students; our families are also taxpayers and they deserve the same investments in their education. Tax dollars do not belong to superintendents or school boards or business managers or the unions, but to the students who should most directly benefit from them – regardless of where they choose to attend school. Because we receive public funding like all schools, we are held to the same standards of how we spend that money as all other public schools. We are subject to being audited by the Attorney General’s Office, we must conduct our own audit, we must competitively bid contracts, and we must adhere to all of the Sunshine laws as well as Right to Know laws. The demonization of our schools based on the notion that taxpayer money is not accounted for in a transparent or responsible way is not just misleading, it is patently false. These misperceptions, and many others, do not only insult the nearly 800 employees and tens of thousands of students and alumni, but also insults the families who made the decision to leave their traditional school and enroll their child or children in our school. If the intent is to have a constructive dialogue about how best to reform the system to benefit all students, I welcome this opportunity to meet with your committees to make sure that we eliminate these falsehoods and misperceptions.

I also believe it is critical that policy makers fully understand and recognize the difference between a cyber program and a cyber school. It is commonly stated that it costs a fraction of what we are reimbursed to educate a student, yet this ignores the fact that we are comprehensive public school. We have over 300 full-time Pennsylvania certified PSEA teachers, principals and other administrators, advisors, counselors, a business office, a large tech team, and others who support our students and their families, both in and out of the classroom. We have buildings in Midland to accommodate both our staff and students,



From the Office of the Chief Executive Officer

nine regional offices and staff across the Commonwealth, extracurricular activities like Prom, yearbook, martial arts, field trips and dozens of other activities for our students. We provide each and every student with laptops, laptop cameras, printers and, when needed, internet connection.

For so many of our families, traditional public schools did not work – for them. They looked for a better option -- for them. It was frustrating to hear how many times an administrator from their former district told them that they were wrong, that their child was going to get an inferior education, that parents were making irresponsible decisions, that somehow a principal or superintendent knows what was better for their children than their own families. The reality is exactly the opposite. As a colleague once stated, the first decision our families made was to leave their current school; the second decision was where to go. What is frustrating for them – and us – is that some legislators and policy makers wish to take this option away or diminish it in such a way that it is no longer a viable option. Schools like PA Cyber need to be able to serve all our students with a comprehensive education, one that allows them to thrive both in and out of the classroom. All the services and resources we provide are vital to that goal.

PA Cyber has been consistent in its desire to work with the Governor, PDE, and state legislators to discuss true charter reform, not to simply cut our reimbursements and “fix” concerns that don’t truly exist. But these discussions need to follow four principles: they are fair, transparent, based on facts not perceptions, and do not treat our students as second-class citizens. We welcome the opportunity to do so with both the Appropriations and Education Committees.