

Good morning, everyone. My name is Brandon D. Coney, and I have the pleasure of serving as the Chief Executive Officer of Urban Pathways K-5 College Charter School, located in the Cultural District of Downtown Pittsburgh. I am here today to talk to you all about the importance of charter schools here in the Commonwealth. I would be remiss if I didn't state this for the record – charter schools ARE public schools. I've heard that it's a debate between charters and traditional schools, which it shouldn't be because we are both publicly funded. One is an independently operated public school while the other is operated by a school district. The real debate is about whether any **AND** every child can receive a good education. It's worth noting that the importance of charter schools can be a subject of debate, and opinions on their significance may vary among different stakeholders.

You see, not only am I a charter school leader, but I am also a father. Both of my children attended charter schools and they were the reason why I left financial services in Corporate America to become an educator. When we decided to have children, we made it a point that education would come first in their lives, as it was the foundation for their futures. We chose to send them to The Urban Academy of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School located in the Larimer section of Pittsburgh because the local school districts weren't providing the education that we knew our children deserved. Charter schools offer parents and students an alternative to traditional schools via school choice. This allows parents to choose an educational option that best fits their child's needs, interests, and learning styles. In Pennsylvania, where public school quality can vary, charter schools can provide an alternative for families seeking different educational approaches.

Additionally, charter schools have more flexibility in their curriculum, teaching methods, and organizational structure compared to traditional schools. This flexibility allows them to experiment with innovative educational models, which can serve as laboratories for testing new ideas and approaches in education. Charter schools often cater to specific populations or educational needs. They can serve as specialized institutions for students with particular interests, such as the arts and science, like Urban Pathways or technology and black studies, like Urban Academy, or those who may require alternative approaches to learning, such as students with disabilities, like Provident Charter School located in Pittsburgh which focuses on children with Dyslexia, or those at risk of falling behind in traditional settings, like Passport Academy. Charter schools allow for small group instruction and personalized education plans for students because we made that a priority.

The presence of charter schools in Pennsylvania has created competition within the education system, which has led to varied reactions from traditional schools including improving their performance, offerings, and outcomes. In some cases, charter schools can help alleviate overcrowding in traditional schools by providing additional educational options and facilities. Charter schools often involve parents and the community more directly in school governance and decision-making processes. This can lead to increased parental engagement and investment in their children's education and future.

Charter schools receive public funding, which means they can offer tuition-free education to students. This can be particularly important for families who may not have the means to send their children to private schools. Even still, the funding mechanism for charter schools is one of the biggest challenges that we face. Most people don't know this, but charter schools are funded mainly by the home school districts that the students come from. There is a statutory funding formula created by the Commonwealth and each school district fills out what is called a PDE-363. The amount of funding is based on said formula, which requires rates for both nonspecial and special education students. Then,

based on the number of students we receive (or anticipate) we craft a budget and have to live within the frameworks of that budget or run the risk of closing. Charter schools can't rely on raising property taxes or bailouts from the Commonwealth to keep operating like school districts can and do. I have constantly said that if districts were forced to do their annual budgets in the same way that charter schools would, changes would be made across the board and the importance of not wasting, but targeting funds to where it matters would improve significantly. For every dollar that school districts receive to educate students, charter schools only receive \$0.71 of that dollar, and the home district is only responsible for providing transportation for the students. The constant response that I hear is that charter schools are taking funding away from traditional schools, which just isn't an accurate statement. If a school district isn't educating a child, then why would they receive funding for them? Does it really cost \$0.29 on the dollar to provide a bus for **ANY** student?? I am more than willing to have a conversation about how charter schools are funded, especially from the realm of special education students. But that conversation needs to be open, and all parties involved would have to agree to work towards a solution in good faith.

It's important to note that the impact and importance of charter schools can vary depending on their specific performance, governance, and adherence to educational standards. Charter schools in Pennsylvania are subject to various accountability measures to ensure they maintain educational standards and provide quality education. This includes compliance with state regulations and oversight by local authorizers, as well as the school's own Board of Directors. Some could argue that charter schools are more regulated and scrutinized more heavily than their district counterparts.

Instead of focusing on a battle between charters and traditional schools, why don't we work together in collaboration to educate **OUR** students, for that's what they are, regardless of where they attend school, **right**? Isn't **THEIR** education more important than **WHO** gets the check? Working in conjunction could include sharing best practices with one another, doing combined professional development, sharing services such as facilities maintenance, food service, and even information technology, are all ways in which we could work together and cut costs in the process. Can you imagine a world where we are actually doing what's in the best interests of the students?

Ultimately, the importance of charter schools in Pennsylvania, as in any state, depends on how well they fulfill their mission of providing quality education options, fostering innovation, and meeting the diverse needs of students and families while maintaining transparency and accountability. As the CEO of Urban Pathways K-5 College Charter School, I have made it my personal mission and responsibility to provide my families with the best learning environment and opportunities available to them, for they deserve it just as much as kids who live in Upper St. Clair and Lower Merion. Thank you all for your time and consideration.