

My name is P.K. Poling. For the last decade, I've been the CEO of Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School in Midland.

We all know that charter schools are controversial for some people. Often, our battles begin right in our home district—our chartering district. It would be nice if we were able to work together with the people right in our hometowns to serve our students. All of us also know that this unfortunately isn't the case—which is one reason the movement to add alternative paths to chartering is gaining support. As the CEO of a school whose chartering district has been keeping our charter renewal in limbo since 2020, I unfortunately have lots of firsthand experience with this situation.

However, it doesn't matter what educational entity all of us here today represent—elementary or secondary, public or charter, cyber or brick-and-mortar. And it doesn't matter what side of the aisle we're on politically.

There's one thing I know that everyone in this room can agree upon. That is the safety of our students.

For those of you who don't know about us, Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School is a brick-and-mortar charter school for grades 7 to 12. We've been in existence for almost 20 years—I was its first principal. And year after year, we have served our students and their families in exemplary fashion.

How do I know this? One reason is because some of our students are visiting here with us today. I'd like to welcome members of Mrs. Mia Frank's Pre-Law and the Arts Department. Pre-Law and the Arts is the newest of our seven arts departments. At Lincoln Park, we continue to grow and expand, and we do this because of the continual demand for the arts education we provide.

I also know that our school has been, and continues to be, a success, because the majority of our students travel incredible distances to get to our school. They do it, year after year, to receive that arts education that they can't get anywhere else.

Our internal numbers show that the average student at Lincoln Park spends close to two hours on a bus every single day to reach us. Many of our students spend much longer than that. It's not uncommon for us to see seventh and eighth graders on a school bus in excess of five hours daily. And that's *before* you factor in the time it takes for these students to reach the hubs where bus service is provided. There's no need to get into all the details here, but for more information on our bus routes and transportation services, you can refer to the packet we've put together for you.

Not only do our students and their families go to great lengths to get to Lincoln Park, but when they get here, they stay here. Our retention rate has always been about 95 percent—and it's higher still for middle schoolers.

Why am I telling you all this? Because for the past two decades, Lincoln Park has managed to transport thousands of satisfied students to our school and back home—without a single penny from the state and local government. And without a single penny of transportation assistance from most of the 90 different school districts we serve across Western Pennsylvania.

Instead, we have spent our own funds to contract with private transportation companies. That line item in our budget is approaching a million dollars a year. It's a huge chunk of our annual budget, and with rising gas prices and driver shortages, it certainly isn't costing us any less these days.

You may ask, so what? You've made the decision to transport students, and it seems to be working. Why bother bringing this up today?

The reason I do is an issue of simple fairness. We are a school of choice. Our students are exercising their right to choose where they receive their education—a choice guaranteed to them by state law. The fact that students continue to choose Lincoln Park means that, like other charter schools, we're not going away. We're not going to be legislated out of existence, no matter what the supporters of bills like HB 1422 might hope. We are here, and will remain here, because the most important voices have already spoken, time and again, on this issue: the voices of our students and families.

I should also point out that transportation is a vital part of that right to school choice. Every year, we lose students who badly want to attend Lincoln Park, but who simply cannot manage to get here—even with the services we provide. Some come from single-parent families. Some are economically disadvantaged. Some live in rural areas. In every instance, they may have no one to take them to the hubs we've set up. These students have the same right to school choice as everyone else, but it's being compromised by transportation issues.

But beyond fairness is a far bigger issue, one that transcends politics and pettiness: the issue of student safety.

I'm sure that most people here know that charter schools receive, on average, between 25 to 30 percent less funding than our public-school counterparts. How can we manage to educate our students at Lincoln Park when faced with this funding disparity?

We survive—and thrive—because we've become ruthlessly efficient. And therefore, we have become exemplary stewards of the public's money. There is no waste in our operation. All our faculty members wear many different hats because we can't just pass jobs off to the next guy. There is no "next guy."

At our school, there is an almost limitless amount of activity that goes on outside normal school hours. There's a full slate of theatrical performances, concerts, dance shows, readings, and other arts events, as well as the boys and girls athletics you find at traditional public schools.

In addition, we have more than 20 admissions events a year, and that number is growing, as we try to spread the word about Lincoln Park and what a special place it is. Every single one of these events requires the participation of our small but dedicated staff.

It's a year-round commitment, and we're glad to do it. Because we all know that if you just take care of students, many of the other problems of education disappear. So, we make sure that the money we *do* receive goes directly to the education of our students.

That extra 25 to 30 percent of funding per pupil that we *don't* receive stays in the students' home districts. Some people believe it's only right that these dollars stay in local communities.

I'm not here to argue that issue today. What I *am* here to argue is that of that 25 to 30 percent of funding that stays in students' home districts to *not* educate them, brick-and-mortar charter schools should be entitled to a small percentage to offset our transportation costs.

As many people here know, school districts within 10 miles of our school are obligated to transport our students on their buses. We would therefore exempt those seven districts from either of the proposals I'm about to share.

However, we believe that all other districts outside that 10-mile radius should contribute an additional 5 percent of their per pupil allotment, to help defray transportation costs for brick-and-mortar charters.

Or, we believe we should be eligible for the same transportation subsidy reimbursement from the state that all traditional brick-and-mortar schools receive. Again, that is just simple fairness—after two decades where our school and other brick-and-mortar charter schools have endured clearly unfair treatment.

Transportation costs are rising at a rate that far outstrips our ability to keep up. We are already running the tightest ship possible. We would not make this proposal if we didn't need the money for actual, tangible, expenses—to serve the students who have chosen our school to meet their educational needs.

Neither of these proposals would cover our transportation expenses. But they *would* allow us to upgrade our services. It would allow us to add more buses and more routes. And it would certainly allow us to make the transportation service we offer our students better—because 100 percent of any money we receive will go directly into our transportation services.

About 500 of our students are eligible for the private transportation we provide. About 80 percent—400 students—take advantage of this service annually. But what about the other 20 percent?

They're transporting themselves, at their own expense. In many cases, this involves student drivers, most traveling long distances, often early in the morning, in all sorts of weather conditions.

With the transportation subsidy we propose, at least some of those student drivers would take advantage of the additional bus service we could provide. And all our students would benefit from shorter, more direct routes, and other service improvements we would implement.

Some might argue that once students choose to attend a brick-and-mortar charter school like Lincoln Park, the home district's responsibility to that student ends. I don't think anyone in this room would take such a hard line, however, about the safety and well-being of students from their own, local communities.

We do our utmost to provide the best possible transportation services for our students. We provide the maximum number of buses and hubs possible. We spend hundreds of hours a year coordinating bus routes to ensure that we can serve the maximum number of students possible, with as few delays as possible.

Most of our faculty and staff are parents, so we know how important it is to preserve family time. Every hour our families must spend apart, while a student is on a school bus, is an hour those families will never get back.

And every family whose students ride a school bus undoubtedly begins the day with that worry we all have in the back of our minds when we're separated from our kids. We don't rest until they're back home safely. So, we know firsthand how important it is that we provide the best transportation service we can, every single day, every single year.

When it comes to student safety, like I said a few moments ago, we're all partners. Each one of us in this room has the same interest: keeping these students, for whom we have a shared responsibility, healthy, happy, and educated, the best way we know how.

The transportation policies I've outlined here cut across party lines, partisan interests, and ZIP codes. We *think* they're fair. But we *know* they would improve student safety. And that's why I'm proposing this change.

We plan to pursue these proposals through the usual legislative channels. But things have a tendency to morph into unrecognizable shapes once they get to Harrisburg. That's why I wanted to speak to you all about our ideas today, so that you can hear firsthand from me how simple and justified a change it would be—and, far more important than that, how it would allow all of us to continue the most critical part of our educational mission.

Thank you for your time and your consideration, and for allowing me this forum today.