

Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 665
Education—Public Charter Schools—Virtual Learning Programs

House Ways and Means Committee

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1:30 pm

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The Maryland State Education Association opposes House Bill 665, which would alter the definition of a public charter school to include virtual charter school programs.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

MSEA opposes this legislation because we believe that, in addition to undermining Maryland's strong charter program, allowing for virtual charter schools will ultimately lead to a decline in the high standards for quality, accountability, and equity we have come to expect and demand from our public charter schools. Based on the growing body of research pointing to the abysmal performance of virtual charter school programs across the country as well as the financial malfeasance that has occurred at the hands of some virtual charter providers, we have grave and well-founded concerns that a move in this direction will not serve Maryland students or taxpayers well.

Proponents of online charter schools and other virtual learning programs contend that this option provides students with expanded learning opportunities and that online schools are capable of tailoring their instruction to the individual learning styles and needs of their students. They also argue that states that provide online learning options benefit from the cost savings gained by not having to spend taxpayer dollars on the resources associated with traditional brick-and-mortar schools, such as personnel, transportation, and facilities.

But what they often don't point out is that virtual charter schools do exact costs, and these costs are paid by students by way of poor academic outcomes. According to a 2017 study by the National Education Policy Center (NEPC), virtual schools underperform academically when compared to other schools, continuing a trend they have seen since they first issued a report on virtual learning back in 2013.¹ Specifically,

- 37.4 percent of full-time virtual schools received acceptable performance ratings; and
- virtual schools have an on-time graduation rate of 43.4 percent (compared to the national average of 82.3 percent).

This study affirms what Stanford's conservative-leaning Center for Research On Education Outcomes (CREDO) found in their 2015². Their research showed that,

Across all tested students in online charters, the typical academic gains for math are -0.25 standard deviations (equivalent to 180 fewer days of learning) and -0.10 (equivalent to 72 fewer days) for reading.... This means that compared to their twin attending [traditional public school], ...attending an online charter school leads to lessened academic growth for the average student.

State officials in Indiana examined their virtual charter schools due to their issues with poor performance. Time and again, they found developments so troubling³ that they have since cut back on their public funding of virtual charter schools.⁴ This is noteworthy considering the support these schools have enjoyed in the state and the pace at which they have proliferated. It should be noted that the poor performance of these virtual charter schools also attracted the attention of Congress.⁵

NEPC's report authors issued the following recommendation:

¹ https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/RB%20Virtual%20Schools%202017_0.pdf (Accessed on February 7, 2021)

² https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/online_charter_study_final.pdf (Accessed on February 7, 2021)

³ <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/in/2019/04/10/indiana-paid-for-thousands-of-students-who-never-earned-credits-at-virtual-charter-schools/> (Accessed on February 7, 2021)

⁴ <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/in/2019/04/24/a-shot-across-the-bow-indiana-cuts-back-on-public-funding-for-virtual-charter-schools/> (Accessed on February 7, 2021)

⁵ <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/in/2018/06/13/indiana-online-charter-schools-face-scrutiny-at-congressional-committee-hearing/> (Accessed on February 7, 2021)



Policymakers [should] slow or stop the growth in the number of virtual schools and the size of their enrollments until the reasons for their relatively poor performance have been identified and addressed. They should prioritize understanding why virtual schools perform poorly under a college- and career-ready accountability system and how their performance can be improved prior to expansion.⁶

Given our state and our country's current experience with nearly a year of virtual learning under the emergency precautions necessitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, there can be no further doubt that virtual learning, by and large, has been an abysmal failure for the vast majority of our students, particularly those who are the most vulnerable or who are the most in need of academic and non-academic supports. Based on the outcry of parents throughout our state and across the nation, it appears as though we are not alone in our serious concerns about the normalizing and institutionalizing of virtual learning for our students.

We support Maryland's current charter school law because we believe it is one of the strongest in the nation. It strikes the right balance between local control, accountability, and innovative instruction. Our strong law has helped Maryland avoid the pitfalls of other states with lower standards that have led to increased fraud, undermining of local control, and poor student performance. For these reasons, **we strongly urge an unfavorable report on House Bill 665.**

⁶ https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/RB%20Virtual%20Schools%202017_0.pdf (Accessed on February 7, 2021)