

22 February 2022

Dear Ways and Means Committee,

In fall of 2018, we enrolled our daughters into Texas Connections Academy @ Houston (TCAH) after my younger daughter was experiencing difficulty in a public charter school. My older daughter, who was doing well in school, decided she wanted to enroll in TCAH when she saw the flexibility and opportunities that were provided to her younger sister through the program. Our family has been in love with virtual school ever since. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, my daughters supplemented extracurricular activities with volleyball, track, saxophone lessons, and clarinet lessons. Since returning to the Maryland area, we currently do fitness videos and take walks—we sincerely hope to get back to their preferred hobbies once things normalize.

When our family joined TCAH, we entered into a partnership between myself, my children, and my children's teachers—all working together for my children's academic success. Through this partnership, we were quickly able to identify troubled areas for my younger daughter through increased visibility of her work assignments/testing habits, and periodic meetings with her teacher. We were ultimately able to develop a plan with her teacher to help address many of the issues she was having. We continue to utilize this plan today.

Through the TCAH, we also received quick turnarounds for graded assessments with very thoughtful and detailed feedback. This feedback was used as a conversation piece for my younger daughter and myself to address areas she was struggling with. The feedback process also fortified meaningful discussions between my daughters and their teachers regarding their academic development. Through the virtual environment, access to graded assignments are immediate—we no longer had to wonder the status of graded assessments, or figure out what happened to a “missing” graded assignment.

The virtual environment and flexibility with TCAH, also allowed me to take my daughters with me when I had to travel for work—they were able to remain on schedule with their assignments and course deliverables. This environment promotes course work flexibility with continuous access to schoolwork, courses can be accessed anytime, anyplace, ensuring no missed time.

While enrolled in TCAH, my daughters were considered students of Houston Independent School Division (HISD) and were able to participate in programs offered to HISD students. This included taking state test assessments (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)) and an opportunity to participate in the TCAH's Dual Enrollment Program.

My older daughter, who was already doing well in school, received an opportunity to participate in TCAH's Dual Enrollment Program through San Jacinto College. My daughter successfully completed 15 college level credits. Although challenging, she remained excited to tell relatives and friends that she was enrolled in college. Participating in TCAH's Dual Enrollment Program allowed her to truly shine and excel, making and meeting new personal goals.

In April 2020, I accepted a position in Washington, D.C and we were no longer able to participate in TCAH. We were disappointed to find out that Maryland did not offer a similar program. Although my daughters were able to receive a scholarship to attend Pearson's Academy—and worth every penny, the cost to attend is still quite expensive. My younger son started kindergarten this year and had to participate in a separate virtual school due to financial costs associated with Pearson Academy.

I was also disappointed to find out that Maryland did not offer the same Dual Enrollment program. I reached out to multiple higher learning institutions to include our local community college—the College of Southern Maryland (CSM); and even with her San Jacinto College transcript, CSM would not make an exception for my daughter to attend CSM under their Dual Enrollment Program.

While all students learn differently—virtual school was a great option for both my daughters and allowed them to thrive and excel at their own pace. It also allowed me an opportunity to be a part of their journey, and greatly improved our mother-daughter relationship. Despite the financial strain, I am very excited about the path they are on and we regularly discuss their plans for the future—which is very special to me. Virtual school may not be for everyone, but it was and is an amazing opportunity for our family. An opportunity that should be an option at no additional cost to all Maryland students.

I ask that you strongly consider providing the option for virtual school at no additional cost to all Maryland students.

Thanking you in advance for your time and consideration,

Kimberly Shirley

*Mother of Three Amazing Children—whose lives' changed dramatically through the option of virtual school.*