



# PHILADELPHIA

## FEDERATION of TEACHERS

TO: MEMBERS OF THE PENNSYLVANIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

FROM: JERRY T. JORDAN, PRESIDENT, PHILADELPHIA FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

RE: OPPOSITION TO CHARTER EXPANSION (HB356 & HB357)

---

The expansion of charter schools in Pennsylvania has been catastrophic for public education, and the continued use of public dollars for unaccountable, unfettered growth of an unproven model of education is deeply troubling. The package of legislation proposed—particularly HB356 and HB357—would be extraordinarily detrimental to the future of public education in Philadelphia and across the Commonwealth.

### Bill Analysis: HB357

- This legislation is another stunning attempt to circumvent local control and autonomy, to promote unfettered charter growth, and to further siphon funding from public education.
- The financial impacts of HB357 would be massive, and this legislation has the potential to completely obliterate the public education system in Philadelphia and municipalities across the Commonwealth.
- **In Philadelphia alone, over the next 5 years, HB357 would have a cumulative impact of anywhere from \$150 Million to \$350 Million.**
  - The elimination of local autonomy regarding the application process has the effect of incentivizing charters to refuse to execute signed agreements. To allow for this unfettered growth would be catastrophic for public school districts, particularly in areas where unchecked charter growth has caused enormous fiscal impact already.
- The legislation proposes the establishment of a standards charter application, with limited criteria utilized to evaluate such application. (p.8, Sec. 1719-A). Further, the legislation proposed the complete elimination of any local control over such evaluations (p.10, Sec.1719-A-19-b).
- In addition to further stacking the approval and appeals processes against the local school boards, HB357 allows for annual enrollment expansion and provides provisions

for, in an “emergency” not even informing school boards of the intention to expand beyond 10% (p.17, Section 1720-1-f).

- This provides for a workaround to ensure that charter growth continues unmonitored. The same “emergency” provisions allow for the relocation of school buildings without notifications. (p.18, Section 1720-1-G).
- There appear to be a number of workarounds regarding admissions criteria:
  - Parents who have “actively participated in the development of a charter school” (p.19, sec.1723-A) have admissions priority for their child(ren). This is a vague requirement and opens the door to preferential treatment.
  - Additionally, “preference shall be given to students who reside in the district or districts” (p.19, sec.17230A). This does not break admissions requirements down to catchment level preferences. Thus, because all of Philadelphia’s charters are within one district, this allows another workaround for preferential admissions procedures.
  - Further, the legislation allows, in the same section as admissions requirements are outlined, for charters to undertake a particular “academic focus” or “or a specialized area or accelerated program of study, such as mathematics, science or the arts.” (p.20, sec.17230A-2).
    1. While language has been removed to indicate that these specialized areas may influence admissions requirements in elementary school, because the permission to allow a certain academic focus remains outlined in the section regarding admissions criteria, our concerns about how this will be implemented remain.
    2. Further, this section maintains permissibility for high schools to selectively admit students in performing arts schools. While there are a number of selective admissions in Philadelphia, we question the impact this language would have on the charters’ service to the entire community.
- The provision of a standard charter application created and managed at the state, along with the ability for continued enrollment growth, relocations, and the lack of substantive changes to cyber charter enrollment and evaluation requirements are but some of the reasons for our unequivocal opposition to this legislation.

## Bill Analysis: HB356

- Again, HB356 sets the stage for further charter expansion, and moves us further away from Pennsylvania’s constitutional and moral obligation to provide every child with a “thorough and efficient” system of public education. Of particular concern is the following:
  - A charter school entity shall have the right of first refusal to purchase or lease, for educational purposes only, a public school building or a part of a public

school building that is [FOR SALE OR LEASE] by a school entity which is the property titleholder (p.5, Sec. 1722-A-b.1.1)

This provision sets the stage for more school closures, charter takeovers, and furthering the systemic disinvestment in public education. To codify the already glaring inequities our students in public schools face is unacceptable. Despite the amended language, our concerns with the bill remain.

- Further, this legislation promotes unaccountable charter growth by allowing for backdoor expansion of charter chains and removing any district oversight in the process:
  - A charter school or regional charter school that does not have in the written charter any limits on student enrollment or caps is permitted to MAY operate the school at more than one location within the district that authorized the charter, AS LONG AS EXPRESSLY PERMITTED BY THE TERMS OF ITS CHARTER. (p.6, Sec.1722-A-d)
- Again, despite amendments, our concerns remain that HB356 would encourage school closures, charter chain expansion, and unfettered growth.

## Conclusion

Whether in the form of HB356, HB357, or any other piece of legislation, the expansion of charters in the Commonwealth is not sustainable and the legislature's obligation is to ensure that students in Pennsylvania are afforded a thorough and efficient public education.

To that end, it is incumbent upon the legislature to seriously address the facilities crisis our schools are facing and the decades of underfunding our public schools have endured. The School District of Philadelphia will pay more than \$900 Million dollars in charter costs next year, representing a nearly \$100 Million increase. The growth of charter costs is only increasing, and the legislature must not engage in shortsighted efforts to further hamstring public education.

***These efforts to further divest in our public schoolchildren must be soundly rejected. The PFT will continue advocating for a fully funded system of public education, and we urge the General Assembly to do the same.***