

## **HB 724**

**Education – Public Charter Schools – Virtual Learning Programs**

**Delegate Joseph Boteler**

**2/19/20**

Dear Chair Kaiser and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

Thank you for your time today to discuss House Bill 724. This bill alters the definition of "public charter school" to include a virtual learning program; requiring a virtual learning program of a public charter school to employ a teacher with the same certification required by professional staff of other public schools. I am introducing this bill again because I believe it promotes schools choice, gives all kinds of learners, offers families' flexibility, and provides and an alternate option for schooling that is both accountable and rigorous for the students.

(Definition of charter school)

“A charter school under contract with a school board under in which all or a portion of the instruction is provided through means of the Internet, and the pupils enrolled in and instructional staff employed by the school are geographically remote from each other.”

Virtual charter schools are publicly funded, non-sectarian schools that are exempt from many regulations that apply to traditional public schools and that offer some of their classes online” (Wisconsin board of Ed).

Because charter schools are publically funded but independently run, autonomy is given to the teacher and parents to craft an education for the students that accommodates and nourishes the individual's optimal potential. Online charter schools not only provide equal access for all levels of socioeconomic standings, but very importantly allow students who have disabilities, or parents in the military who travel for work, to have this flexibility of continuity in education. K12 and Connections Academy are examples of virtual schools used in over 29 states across the U.S.

Virtual Charter schools have successfully implemented in Pennsylvania, Florida, Georgia and Wisconsin among many other states and HB 724 will bring this opportunity to Maryland Charter schools. Online charter schools are a growing market in the school sector, beginning in the early 2000's.

**Maryland currently has 50 operating charter schools with over 22,882 children attending these 50 schools. (MD alliance of public charter schools)**

Virtual Charter Schools are beneficial because:

- **Flexible:** As these are cyber schools, they can encompass both live classes set at a specific time and a self-paced class. Online charter schools offer

freedom of choice and provide a maximum of flexibility for families.

- Unlike brick and mortar schools, online charter schools can break the barrier of poverty. This state funded option would be open to all families regardless of ability to pay but with more flexibility than a traditional school.
- Issues such as bullying and school shootings give parents a reason to keep kids safe at home. This flexibility allows access to a quality education to students who need this individualized education plan such as top tier athletes, those struggling with mental health issues and military families who travel and move frequently and many others find a private learning environment more productive than a classroom. It also allows students to focus on certain areas of learning, as some charter schools specialize in the arts or sciences. Teachers are still a vital component for the student's growth and education.
- Inclusive: You can opt. into the educational program without any added cost. You get the education for free, just as you would attend the physical charter school.
- Virtual schools eliminate time spent on transportation to school and the 6 hours spent at a school, rather it presents an efficient individual alternative model of education.

- School Choice is an important aspect of educational freedom and adding a virtual component to public charter schools gives another viable educational option that prepares students for college and careers.

## **The Online Learning Approach**

Many parents and educators are seeking alternatives to traditional classroom-based education that can help improve academic achievement. Demand for these alternatives is evident in the growing number of choices available to parents and students. Online schools represent one approach to online learning that is gaining acceptance.

Pupils typically attend from their homes and communicate with teachers by e-mail, telephone, or in online discussions. It is important to note that some virtual charter schools operate under a blended learning model and require physical attendance; therefore, it is important to contact these schools and discuss expectations prior to enrollment.

## **What Parents Need to Know About Virtual Charter Schools**

- Online schooling is not the easy way out. It requires initiative and self-discipline and the ability to work independently.

- Attendance at a virtual charter school is not homeschooling, even though the pupil may primarily attend school from home. A virtual charter school is a public school authorized by a locally-elected school board, with a public school curriculum and certified teachers. Homeschooling is a home-based private education program created by the parent.
- Pupils in virtual charter schools must attend school regularly, in whatever manner attendance is defined and monitored in the specific virtual charter school. Failure to do so could result in the pupil being dropped from the virtual charter school. Additionally, some virtual charter schools require students to physically attend a school building for a portion of the instructional time.

Lastly, charter schools cultivate a student that has initiative and self-discipline and the ability to work independently. Maryland will greatly benefit from adding a virtual component to the already existing charter schools in Maryland. HB724 improves access, flexibility and options while maintaining accountability and educational excellence in our great state.

Thank you and I urge a favorable report.