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Governor Tom Wolf
Office of the Governor
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Wolf:

We understand that multiple Public School Code bills may be approved by the General Assembly in the coming days. The numerous provisions in these bills will impact the lives of Pennsylvania’s public schoolchildren, many in ways that could limit students’ access to safe, welcoming schools in their communities. As the only statewide organization solely dedicated to ensuring these children’s access to a quality public education, the Education Law Center urges you to **veto three specific legislative proposals** that would have a particularly damaging impact: (1) the dangerous expansion to the armed presence of security personnel in schools; (2) efforts to dilute the charter authorization process; and (3) the creation of a charter review commission if it omits the critical issue of special education funding for charter schools.

Proposed amendments to Article XIII-C of the Public School Code would **dangerously expand the armed presence of school security personnel**. A new category of “armed school security guards” would be authorized to carry a gun in school with virtually no checks on their fitness to do so, unlike school resource officers who must go through extensive policy academy training and school police officers who must be deputized by a judge. Any private citizen would be able to become an armed school security guard after obtaining just four things: a license to carry; school security clearances; firearms training; and a 40-hour course. Existing school staff, including teachers, could be hired as armed guards on top of their official school duties simply by signing a contract with their school district. Students and families would be left unaware of whether school officials they trust have been empowered to fire a weapon on them.

Given your commitment to providing Pennsylvanians with needed mental health supports, we urge you not to expose schoolchildren – roughly 60 percent of whom have already suffered or witnessed some form of trauma within the previous year¹ – to the added trauma of being in front of the barrel of a gun at school. The dangers of increasing the number of guns in schools are simply too great, particularly for students of color and students with disabilities who are likely to be the fatal victims in bias-laden interactions with armed personnel. This bill doesn’t make our schools safer.

¹ Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, U.S. Dep’t of Justice, National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence 5 (September 2015), https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/248547.pdf?ed2f26df2d9c416fbddddd2330a778c6=nnxrpdoznnzubbzrr&utm_source=youth.gov&utm_medium=federal-links&utm_campaign=reports-and-resources.

We also urge you to reject legislation, currently billed as HB 357, that would **constrain authorizers' ability to hold charter schools accountable for equitably, successfully, and efficiently educating students**. Pennsylvania already fares poorly in national assessments of charter authorization practices because of our weak charter laws and low standards for authorization.² Rather than build upon the one notable success in state practices – the more robust application and renewal requirements implemented by the state's largest authorizer, the School District of Philadelphia³ – proposed legislation would cripple school districts' ability to effectively monitor and oversee charter operators. It would expect less of charter schools – less information about their proposed or actual operations, less transparency about how equitably they serve the community, and less accountability about their compliance with federal and state laws. At the same time, it would grant them far more, including the ability to unilaterally expand enrollment by up to 10% without board approval and without regard for performance, equity, or compliance.

Research shows that charter schools underserve students with disabilities, and the current system of state special education funding for charter schools gives them a financial incentive to do so.⁴ **Authorizing a charter school commission to review the sector without examining the current system of providing special education funding to charter schools** will ignore the educational needs of the most marginalized students and the fiscal challenges of the neediest districts, which not coincidentally have among the largest charter enrollments. It is a missed opportunity and irresponsible to authorize a charter commission that does nothing to address this problem.

Our position on these proposed bills is informed by our experience representing both district and charter school students in their fight for a quality public education; it is neither “pro-charter” nor “anti-charter” but decidedly in favor of public education and the students it serves. For the sake of those students, we urge you to veto legislation arming security personnel and “reforming” charters – in whatever form they arrive on your desk.

Respectfully submitted,



Reynelle Brown Staley
Policy Director

cc: Mike Brunelle, Chief of Staff
Meg Snead, Secretary of Policy and Planning
Allison Jones, Deputy Secretary of Policy and Planning

² 2016 State Policy Analysis: State-by-State Profiles, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS (2016) https://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/QC_TXStateReport_IndvStateReport_Web_Pennsylvania.pdf.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Our research indicates that charter schools are not currently equitably serving these special populations and stresses the importance of rigorous authorization and renewal processes. *Safeguarding Educational Equity: Protecting Philadelphia Students' Civil Rights Through Charter Oversight*, EDUCATION LAW CENTER (Feb. 2019) https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/ELC_report-Safeguarding-Civil-Rights.pdf

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