

PUBLIC EDUCATION SOS: Save Our Schools From Privatization

Before Tom Corbett, Pennsylvania never had a governor whose mission has been to attack, undermine and ultimately destroy the public education system so long a source of Pennsylvania pride. The Corbett war on public schools must be stopped, and the damage done must be repaired.

Every Democrat running for Governor in 2014 pledges to restore the \$1 billion in school funding that Corbett cut, and return to a fair funding formula, along the lines of the Rendell administration.

But funding shortages are only the symptom – not the root cause – of our public education problems. What's really happening in Pennsylvania is a concerted and deliberate agenda to weaken our public schools and discredit our Pennsylvania tradition of public schools excellence, in order to replace them with privatized schools funded by the taxpayer.

A charter school is a private school that operates with public funds. Some charter schools are run by a private, for-profit corporation, others by a private, non-profit corporation. All charter schools are governed by private boards of directors that are selected by the founder and managers of the charter school.

Elected local school boards have no say in running private, charter schools, but the school districts and their taxpayers are forced to pay for them. Charter schools are completely unaccountable to those who are paying for them, even when the charter is doing a poor job of educating its students.

I am the only candidate for Governor who unapologetically opposes funding charter schools that have poor student performance. I will redirect approximately \$700 million per year from poor charter schools to public schools and to charter schools with good student performance. The huge amount of money going to all charter schools – more than \$1 billion annually --is the major reason why both school taxes are going up and the quality of public education is deteriorating.

I am the only candidate for Governor who is willing to expose the cynical strategy of the privatization interests to damage and destroy public education so they can divert more and more taxpayer money into the privatized schools they operate.

The Politics of Public School Destruction

Unless we accurately diagnose the problem, we won't come up with the solutions needed to correct it, and our public schools' problems will persist. We must recognize that the crisis in our schools has largely manufactured by those with ideological and financial interests in destroying them.

Tom Corbett and his ideological allies want to privatize much more than the liquor stores and the state lottery. We are facing a well-financed and organized privatization movement whose money has bought support in Harrisburg, not only on the Republican side of the aisle, but on the Democratic side, as well.

To combat them, I plan to launch **a multi-pronged approach to restore our public schools to the top rank in the United States**. Read on for more details:

No New Charter Schools Without Accountability and Transparency

Scandals are rocking charter school after charter school, because current law does not have basic requirements for financial accountability and transparency. Large sums of money have been stolen by managers, and federal prosecutions have produced numerous guilty pleas to serious financial crimes committed at charter schools.

Some charter schools have paid hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars going for the legal fees of managers who are the targets of criminal investigations. Still more taxpayer money has gone to pay for personal expenses of spouses of charter school board members and for lavish perks and boondoggles like visiting tropical resorts. And while public schools close libraries, layoff teachers, and operate without nurses, charter schools spend cumulatively millions in taxpayer dollars on billboards and other advertising.

Charter schools also benefit from the current law that requires public schools to overpay them. For example, public schools pay charter schools twice for pension expense and must pay the same amount whether a student attends a cyber-charter school (with no physical facilities to pay for) or a bricks-and-mortar charter school.

I pledge that **no new or additional charter schools will be approved without a complete overhaul of Pennsylvania's charter law and oversight of charter school operations**.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CHARTER CLASSROOM – The report cards for Pennsylvania's charter schools have been consistently poor. Data from the federally mandated Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures show 71 percent of Pennsylvania's charter schools recording poor student performance.

Cyber-charters have been particularly abysmal: 100 percent of the state's cyber-charters that submitted data during the most recent reporting cycle showed poor student performance.

I do support charter schools that are fulfilling their mission to educate their students, and the data show a number of fine charter schools operating successfully in Pennsylvania. Ad Prima and Christopher Columbus charter schools in Philadelphia, Infinity Charter School in Harrisburg and Environmental Charter School at Frick Park, Pittsburgh, are examples of high performing charter schools that have earned public support.

But I will not fund those charter schools that are failing to deliver quality schooling using the same or comparable measures by which our public schools are gauged.

Funding a poor-performing charter school damages those students who attend it and hurts taxpayers who struggle to pay school taxes. Funding a poor-performing charter school also damages parochial schools that have for decades provided affordable high quality educational options, especially for poor and middle-class families.

In recent years, an astonishing 30,000 students have reportedly left parochial schools in the Philadelphia region to attend charter schools where no tuition is charged. Funding failed charter schools is doing enormous damage to students, taxpayers, and parochial schools.

TRANSPARENCY IN CHARTER MANAGEMENT– Too many charter schools have been misused for profiteering by unscrupulous operators. Federal investigations of charter school corruption have already resulted in eight indictments, so far leading to six guilty pleas for fraudulent use of taxpayer funds.

In the wake of this corruption, the State Auditor General's Office has launched a broad-based audit program to identify charter school financial and administrative mismanagement. In one recent audit, the Auditor General found the company operating the state's largest brick-and-mortar charter school had provided deficient schooling to its children, while siphoning \$1.3 million of taxpayer funds that have gone for improper lease payments.

I will bring these corrupt charter school practices to a swift halt and will freeze the issuance of new charters until new, effective accountability and transparency standards with real teeth are put in place.

Fix the Cyber-Charter Disaster

A 2012 Auditor General's report found that \$365 million a year of taxpayer money is going to 16 cyber-charter schools. Most of this money is supporting schools with poor student performance and some of these funds have been misused in ways that have led to criminal cases.

Moreover, the funding formula allows cyber-charters to reap much more in public funds than their true cost of educating their students. I will act aggressively to **stop overpayments to existing cyber-charters, to stop funding cyber-charter schools with poor student performance, and permit no new ones to operate.**

Restore Full and Fair Funding

Tom Corbett has cut \$1 billion in aid to public schools. He totally wiped out stated budget payments to compensate local school districts for payments to charter schools. The predictable results have been school closures, teacher lay-offs, program

eliminations and capital projects scrapped. It's a starvation strategy by the Governor intended to further cripple the public schools' capacity to do their job in order to justify the diversion of even more taxpayer funds to the charter school operators who finance Corbett and like-minded politicians.

In every state budget, public education and public safety will be my top priorities. I will restore \$1 billion to funding basic education within 2 years and I will increase funding for our public universities by 5% per year, as long as in-state tuition does not increase faster than the rate of inflation. I aim to increase the portion of education costs paid for by state to 50% from today's approximately 32%.

I will also work with the General Assembly to **restore a more equitable, transparent formula for allocating state funds to school districts.** Governor Corbett not only cut total funding for public education but also scrapped the Rendell funding formula that treated poor school districts more fairly. **Pennsylvania should return at least to the Rendell funding formula.**

Return Local Control and END Micro-management

It's long past due to end the hypocrisy of holding schools and districts accountable for student performance, while saddling them with such heavy bureaucratic mandates they can barely attend to their mission of educating children. Parents and taxpayers, acting through their school boards, in partnership with local school administrators, principals and teachers are those best positioned to determine and implement what's right for their schools and their kids.

The era of micro-management from Harrisburg must give way to a new one of local control with meaningful and positive state oversight and support. Specifically, in Philadelphia, where a decade of state control has not improved the city's schools, it is time to restore direct local control and abolish the School Reform Commission.

End Death by Testing

Standardized student testing has its place, but it has taken on an importance far out of proportion to its usefulness, whether in educating students or evaluating performance. Neither school districts nor individual schools should ever have their funding contingent solely on the outcome of a test score. It is not only an incomplete measure, but it also subverts the teacher's role by demanding he or she teach to the test. **A more nuanced, holistic and broader approach for measuring performance is both essential and doable. Crafting it should be led by educators and parents, not politicians.**

Treat Teachers Like Skilled Professionals; They Are

Teacher-bashing is the blood sport of the school privatization movement. It's no way to improve our schools, to educate our kids, or to conduct an earnest and civil discourse about the crucial questions of how best to strengthen public education in Pennsylvania.

I believe our public school teachers are the most dedicated professionals performing the most important public function in our society. We should hold them to high standards, and most of our teachers do meet them precisely because they are so professionally skilled and devoted. But when we set the bar high, those whom we insist clear the hurdle deserve our respect and support at all times. That is especially true for educators teaching largely poor children.

We need to attack poverty and stop attacking teachers. We must support those teachers who try every day to help some of our most vulnerable, neediest children.

I am a strong believer in proven strategies for improving teacher performance and supporting their professional development, in particular master teacher programs that team the most experienced and skilled members of the faculty with their younger, less skilled colleagues in a team-teaching setting.

Start Young, Stay Late

We all know that early childhood education is one of the highest yielding investments we can make in a child's development. Yet during the Corbett years, this has been one of the programs hardest hit by the state's draconian funding cuts. **I will support early childhood education and increase funding for it.**

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My program of accountability and transparency for charter schools; ending the double-dip funding windfall to cyber-charters; restoring \$1 billion in Corbett cuts; returning to a full and fair funding formula; evaluating performance on more than test results; supporting our skilled, professional teacher corps; expanding early childhood education, and extending the school year together add up to the most comprehensive program of educational reform seen in Pennsylvania in decades.

It will return Pennsylvania's public schools back on the road to excellence, where they have traditionally been, and where our children deserve for them to be.