**Written Testimony of Eric Paisner**
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Before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Workforce
*Field Hearing: More Choices, Brighter Futures: Expanding Education Freedom*
Northampton Community College, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania – October 23, 2026

Chairman Walberg, Representative Mackenzie, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify, and thank you, Representative Mackenzie, for bringing this hearing to the Lehigh Valley. Conversations about how our children are educated belong in the communities where those children live, and I am grateful to be part of this one.

I serve as Chief Legal Officer of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the national nonprofit dedicated to advancing public charter schools and supporting the students and families they serve. I am also a charter school parent. I come to this conversation not only as someone who works on charter school law and policy every day, but who lives the benefits of charter schools in my own life.

I see firsthand how charter schools directly serve the families who choose them. My 6th grader recently remarked how he "low-key" prefers half-days to days off: he gets to have shortened versions of all of his classes and see his friends, instead of hanging out with no schedule. The school is obviously doing something right.

Thousands of Lehigh Valley families have made that same choice. And so my message today is simple: charter schools work, and Pennsylvania families deserve more of them. That means policymakers – in Harrisburg, in Washington, and on school boards – should clear the way for charters to grow.

Charter schools are public schools, by law and in practice: tuition-free, open to all, and accountable for results. Nearly 4 million students—an all-time high—attend more than 8,100 charter schools in 46 states.[1] Charters are schools of choice. No child is assigned to one, and families can leave at any time, so charters must keep earning their trust. As a parent, I see that accountability firsthand. And charter schools are earning that trust with their results: Stanford researchers found charter students gain the equivalent of 16 additional days of learning in reading and 6 in math each year compared to peers.[2]

Those national results show up right here, too. In nearby Allentown, public charter school students achieved proficiency rates 68 percent higher in reading, and 37 percent higher in math, compared to their district-school peers. And in Bethlehem, charter school students from low-income families outperformed district-school peers too, achieving higher proficiency rates in both math and reading.

Test scores are only part of the story. The real measure is where students go next, and that's why it means something to be gathered at a community college today. Charter schools are preparing students for secure futures. Their flexibility lets them build pathways around local workforce needs, with industry certifications, employer internships, and dual enrollment.

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[1] National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, national charter school enrollment data.

[2] Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III (Stanford University, 2023).

Here in Pennsylvania and nationwide, families are voting with their feet.

When the first Pennsylvania charter schools opened in 1997, fewer than 1,000 students were enrolled. Today, that number is more than 160,000.[3] Demand still outpaces supply.

In Allentown, charter schools have spent years asking the district to raise enrollment caps that have barely moved, while families wait.[4] Every one of those families is choosing a public school, and every one of those students deserves a seat and fair funding.

Statistics only tell part of the story. Iris Cholula Lopez is a first-generation Mexican American who grew up in Allentown and graduated from Lincoln Leadership Academy Charter School. She was the first in her family to finish high school, and she did it with an associate degree already in hand. Mentors at Lincoln took the time to know her, recognized her potential, and encouraged her to pursue opportunities she might never have considered. She went on to Penn State, which led her to a career in education policy. I am proud to say that, today, Iris is my colleague at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, working to give students across the country the same kind of supportive school community that changed her life.

No single school fits every child. The Education Freedom Tax Credit, modeled on Pennsylvania's own scholarship programs, can help, and not only with private school tuition: it can help charter and other public school students pay for tutoring, special education services, and more. At least 30 states have opted in, and we respectfully urge Governor Shapiro to opt Pennsylvania in before the January 1 deadline.

At the same time, the Charter Schools Program is the only federal funding dedicated to growing high-quality charter schools; nearly half of all charters received it when they opened.[5] This Committee has advanced three bills that would strengthen it without new spending:

The **FLEX Act (H.R. 7082)**, sponsored by Representative Mackenzie, would create much-needed flexibility within the program to ensure funds to schools faster. Thank you, Representative Mackenzie, for your leadership.

The **Equitable Access to School Facilities Act (H.R. 7086)** would help charter schools secure safe, permanent places to learn.

And the **Empower Charter School Educators to Lead Act (H.R. 3453)** would help experienced teachers launch charter schools of their own.

We urge the House to pass all three.

In the end, every family deserves a school that works for their child. As a parent, I know what it means to find one, and students like Iris show what is possible when they do. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

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[3]Pennsylvania Department of Education enrollment data.

[4]Lehigh Valley Public Media, reporting on Allentown School District charter enrollment caps and the Lehigh Valley STEAM Academy Charter School application.

[5]National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "New Charter Schools Program Grants Announced" (September 14, 2026).