

Well, another year has passed. Our community of charters continues to grow- 96,000 students last year, 113,000 this year. Our footprint in Ohio's public education landscape is for the most part stuck in Ohio's main urban centers... the exception of course, our statewide pioneering charter e-schools. Our performance continues to trend positively for another consecutive year. So, what's not to like? Well, let me count the ways.

Despite a decade-long effort, you cannot *starve* charter schools to quality.

A direct apples-to-apples comparison of charter school funding, district to charter by geographic locale, comprehending parity, poverty and special needs funding, exposes a funding gap of more than \$3,200 per student between public charter school students and public district students. That, my friends, is unacceptable. In simple point of fact, this is discriminatory. Year over year, more charter schools in Ohio are forced to close for financial reasons than performance reasons. Are charter school students worth-less?

So we have a problem. Well, here's a solution. With VLT-slot machine dollars headed into Ohio's coffers let's take some of that "for-education-only money" and put it to good use as a per-pupil allotment for facilities for our charter schools. States that care about their charter school community provide facilities funding, because they don't want their precious foundation funding dollars, intended for the classroom, to be used to pay for facility rent or mortgages.

The state budget is tight; we get that, no question. But here's a solution that doesn't create losers for winners. It's simply a new revenue stream purposed for education that could provide facilities funding for charter schools. This funding issue is at the top of the Alliance's list of advocacy objectives moving into the New Year.

Second, next to Florida, Ohio has the highest percentage of online students in the country. As was mentioned earlier, last month 2,000 people attended the online learning conference next door in Indianapolis. Susan Patrick has given us a remarkable overview of where e-learning is headed in the enterprise of global education. Yet in all its wisdom, the Ohio legislature killed the "hybrid" legislation in this year's budget bill. Everybody on this good earth knows that the blended learning environment will be the new norm in the next decade. We own the virtual school environment in Ohio. Why in the world, and I mean the "world" literally, would we want to stumble out of the race into this brave new world of blended, hybrid education when we have this head start? The Ohio Alliance will continue to advocate for hybrid schools in Ohio and this issue remains at the top of our advocacy agenda.

So besides that Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play? Well the state of charter schools in Ohio has never been stronger. As I mentioned earlier, we now have well over 100,000 students enrolled in Ohio community schools. To put that into perspective, that's about the number of students currently enrolled in the Columbus, Cleveland and Toledo school districts combined, and more than Columbus, Cleveland and Dayton combined. That's right, if we were a district, we would have more students than what were formerly the biggest school districts in the state-- combined. Friends and colleagues, charter schools are here to stay in Ohio.

Why this growth trend? The response has many facets to it but these facets are instructive. Parents, more than ever, know how critical a good education is to their children's future. Take a look at the screen slide. What a difference a college and career-ready high school education makes.

School choice gives today's parents the tools to put their children into the best and most personalized school circumstances they can find. They're paying for it; that's their right. That choice may be their local school-district school, and if it is, good for them. But the surging charter school enrollment in Ohio suggests that parents are increasingly in search of smaller, safer, more personalized school settings where differentiated school choices allow for a better fit for their students' learning styles. That's why, as the *Columbus Dispatch* recently reported, charter school choice is starting to slip into Ohio's suburban communities.

So what's on the horizon? What should we be looking for and what should we be focusing on? How about this: "Star Trek"- Remember the familiar opening, "The final frontier," with its mission: "To seek out new life and new civilizations, to go boldly where no man has gone before." Well how about: "The new education frontier- to seek new solutions and innovation, to go boldly where no one has dared to go before." I'm thinking about science fiction because the world of education and technology is moving at light speed. That's our biggest challenge.

The universe of education is changing fast. Just in time information... blended learning... the influence of social media... the gaming industry... technological simulations... adaptive, personalized learning and instruction... and the press of global competition... Charter schools have the ability and the agility to adapt to this constant change which is the new normal in education. Our challenge is to lead and innovate with the confidence that comes from our community's commitment to the quality that will make us second to none among our states and in the world.

Too lofty a goal? I don't think so. If we commit ourselves to be the best, not just good enough to get by, but to be the best of breed, from good to great, the 21st century history of Ohio's public education could read that school choice transformed Ohio's public education by

not only closing the achievement gap but by providing free enterprise and choice to our public educational system, allowing us to compete with the best in the world - going boldly where none had dared to go before.

This larger vision is paramount when we are consumed with our day-to-day responsibilities as teachers and administrators.

Our earthbound focus, the Ohio Alliance's, has to be on improving Ohio's charter school funding circumstances, and the most practical way to do this in the near term is per-pupil facilities allotments. We'll work on this in the current legislative session.

Getting hybrid legislation passed in Ohio is essential. District schools can do hybrids now. They can do blended learning, so why not charters? It makes no sense. We'll work on this in the current legislative session as well.

501(c)(3) tax-exempt bonding authority for Ohio charters, is another top priority. Another way to make the purchase of charter school facilities easier and cheaper. Other states are doing it, why can't we? We can and we have been having conversations with legislators in both houses about this and the governor's office.

It's time for geographic caps on charter schools to go. And step number one is to expand chartering beyond the so-called "Big-Eight" urban districts to the "Urban 21." We pushed for this in the last budget bill but it got kicked out before going to the Governor's office for signature.

And we are strong advocates for incentive funding for high-performing charter schools of all types to help with their facilities and replication, and will support such legislation as it develops, and it is, in the legislature.

Finally, I want to make a couple of exciting announcements:

First, the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools is the proud parent of the new Ohio Charter Law Guidebook. Have a look up on the screen. Months of work in preparation under the guiding hand of our VP of Legal and Legislative Affairs, Stephanie Klupinski, and her group law interns from The Ohio State Law School.

If you have every tried to dive into Ohio Revised code on issues related to community schools, you know what it's like to be lost in the deep woods. It's convoluted. It's fragmented. It's written by folks who specialize in "fine print." It's just plain hard to read, assemble and comprehend. What if you could just look things up by topic? What if the key points were just simple bullet points? What if the explanations were written in plain English. What if there were hyperlinks that took you straight to the relevant code if you wanted to

quote the code? Well, that's it. You've got it. It's free. It's on our website. We hope it makes you better teachers, leaders and board members to have this comprehensible resource. Frankly, we hope it makes legislators more effective, so that *they* can finally understand what's in the code. Many new legislators don't know where to begin. This is our holiday gift to them. It will be available by the beginning of the New Year.

And finally, next year's State Charter School Conference will be right here, October 22-23 at the Columbus Convention Center! We thought about doing it next year in Hawaii but we couldn't charter a boat big enough for all of you! So mark your calendars: October 22-23, 2012.

Thank you all for participating in this year's conference and standing together as a community; we're stronger together! Travel safely, have a nice holiday and let's make our leave to that great musical video... Stand By Me.

Bill Sims, President
Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools
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