

Princeton Charter School

100 BUNN DRIVE, PRINCETON NJ 08540 | WWW.PCS.K12.NJ.US

Phone: 609 924 0575 | Fax: 609 924 0282

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CONTACT:

LISA ECKSTROM

609-924-0575 X2307

leckstrom@princetoncharter.org

RESPONSE TO SUPERINTENDENT COCHRANE'S DECEMBER 1, 2016 STATEMENT:

Overview:

On Thursday, December 1, 2016, Steve Cochrane released a statement about Princeton Charter School's plan to expand enrollment. While his response did not address our plan to introduce a weighted lottery for economically disadvantaged students, it did raise some questions about costs.

With the town of Princeton experiencing a significant spike in enrollment due to new residential developments coming online, the Princeton Public School district has already acknowledged the need to expand its facilities to accommodate many new students in the community. This proposal, if approved, will allow Princeton Charter School to absorb a significant number of the new students and give them a great educational option.

PCS spends \$15,300 per student, while the district spends \$24,000 per student. Presently, PCS educates 8.8% (348/3945) of all students who attend public schools in Princeton, for 5.5% of the total budget (\$5.3 million/\$90.8 million). These budget numbers for PCS and PPS respectively include the cost of debt service.

Response to Superintendent Cochrane:

Board President Josephson responded to Mr. Cochrane's recent statement concerning the application. "We appreciate that Superintendent Cochrane agrees that Princeton Charter is an important part of Princeton's public education system, and that PCS should play an important role in alleviating the fiscal stress the recent enrollment spike will

impose on all Princeton taxpayers. As he notes, working together we can alleviate all district space needs. We look forward to discussing how we can work together to continue providing great public education options for all Princeton children at the lowest cost to taxpayers.

“A few points merit response: first, as to the timing here, it’s unfortunate that Mr. Cochrane decided to issue his statement before he received or we even filed our application. He took a position without even looking at the merits. Let’s also remember the district only identified the enrollment spike in August of this year, and has itself only started to discuss how it will meet those demands. Under state law, PCS cannot propose to expand its enrollment to serve the added demand without filing the application by December 1. Now that PCS has filed that application, we can engage in discussions and work with the district to figure out how PCS can be part of the solution.

“Second, there is absolutely no financial loss to the Princeton Public Schools, but an actual savings of our taxpayer dollars. Mr. Cochrane has suggested that the “cost” to PPS is \$1.4 million. This is both factually inaccurate, as the payment to PCS is approximately \$1.1 million, and misleading. Our public schools must pay for educating our students, regardless of whether they attend Charter or any of the other public schools in our district. Presently, PCS educates 8.8% of the district’s students (348 of 3945) for 5.5% of the total budget (\$5.3 million/\$90.8 million). PCS spends \$15,300 per student, while the district spends \$24,000 per student. Expanding PCS to educate an additional 76 students, represents an annual savings of \$8,700 per student, for a total of \$661,200 to the taxpayers of Princeton.

Moreover, this proposal will have no impact on district transportation costs. Any children, including the additional children, have to be bussed at district expense by law whether they attend PPS or PCS. No additional busses or routes will be needed to serve any new PCS students. Most important, the district is already compensated by the state for PCS bus service. The state charter school funding law holds back 10% of the district’s per pupil expenditure that would otherwise go to PCS for the express purpose of paying for charter student bussing and the other ‘fixed’ district costs Mr. Cochrane cites in his statement. Thus, the district currently retains \$500,000 that should otherwise follow the child who enrolls at PCS. And PPS would retain another \$100,000 that should otherwise follow the children if the expansion is approved. That is the deal districts struck when the charter law was passed. It’s just plain wrong to complain now that it costs them more when they are already compensated by law for the fixed stranded costs when a child moves to PCS.

Third, Mr. Cochrane has erroneously suggested that PPS will not realize cost savings under this expansion because of “fixed costs” that the other Princeton Public schools maintain when a student leaves to attend Charter. Due to the increased number of students in town, PCS is not “taking away,” children from the other PPS schools, but rather is offering additional openings to meet the increased need for education in our community at a significantly reduced cost.

It is plain that the enrollment spike is affecting all grades at PPS, not just the high school, and the district needs both space and new teachers to accommodate it. It will continue to grow in the coming months, and will not leave PPS with underemployed teachers or too small classes. According to district information previously published by *Planet Princeton*:

- 88% of the current year increase in PPS enrollment is in K-8 (145 of 163, and 103 of them are in K-5)
- 65% of this increase in enrollment is from Merwick-Stanworth, Avalon Bay, and Copperwood – but less than 1/3 of the Merwick – Stanworth units were occupied in September, and only 10% of those in AvalonBay – suggesting we can expect at least another 200 or more new students by next fall as those units are fully occupied.

“Mr. Cochrane stated just in October that to accommodate the growth, the district needs both new space and new teachers. ‘We now have very few unoccupied classrooms across our elementaries, so even if we budget for additional teachers, we will have very few places to create new sections.’ *Town Topics*, 10/12/16. Because of far lower overhead, salary cost, and higher teacher contributions towards benefits costs, PCS costs are much lower than those of the district. PCS can much more efficiently serve a significant portion of the new demand.

“Despite these clear and material factual misstatements, we are encouraged that Mr. Cochrane agrees that working together, PPS and PCS can solve the space needs for the long term, and we have invited Mr. Cochrane to meet for just that purpose.”