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## Pennsylvania lawmaker plans hearings on cyber charter school bill by year's end

By Dave Fidlin | The Center Square Nov 1, 2019 Updated Nov 1, 2019



Pennsylvania state Rep. Curt Sonney speaks Sept. 19, 2019, during an education roundtable event with U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos in Harrisburg.

Image courtesy of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives

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A Pennsylvania lawmaker who introduced a bill aimed at changing the structure of the state's charter school system said he intends to hold public hearings before the year draws to a close.

In **House Bill 1897**, state Rep. Curt Sonney, R-Erie, has proposed legislation that would require all Pennsylvania school districts to offer a full-time cyber education program.

Sonney's legislation, first introduced Oct. 7, has been met with criticism from school choice advocates – a **reality he acknowledged** in a recent interview with The Center Square – but the goal, he said, is to make the charter school system accountable to local communities.

"I believe that the system is broken as it is today," Sonney said in the interview. "My goal is not to stifle the system, but greatly expand it."

Since their introduction in 2002, Pennsylvania's cyber charter schools have been overseen at the state level. Sonney's bill would bring their oversight directly under the auspices of local school districts.

But in the interview, Sonney said his goal is not to overpower the various charter schools that are in place across Pennsylvania.

"My bill would put them up against any other education content provider," Sonney said. "Brick-and-mortar charter schools today already have pretty long waiting lists."

Groups that have opposed HB1897 include the National Coalition for Public School Options, an organization advocating for a range of public education choices, including charter, online and magnet schools.

In a statement, Colleen Cook, president of the Public School Options Board, said the 35,000 Pennsylvania students attending charter schools do so for a variety of reasons.

"Whether it was to escape failing or dangerous schools, or because they suffer from physical or emotional disabilities, the simple fact is that this bill would prove disastrous for thousands of families, if passed," Cook said in the statement.

Sonney, who chairs the House Education Committee, said he plans to solicit testimony from a range of people across all types of schools in the near future.

“I can assure you we will have public hearings,” Sonney said. “I’m absolutely willing to hear any comments on how to make this bill better. I want to create a very workable bill that gets to the heart of the issues.”

The plan, Sonney said, is to have hearings on HB 1897 “before the end of the year.”

“I’m not going to let this sit idle,” Sonney said. “I want to get on it.”

In its current form, Sonney’s bill calls on all public school districts to begin offering full-time cyber charter schools in the 2021-22 school year, as outlined in his **legislative memo**.

Other provisions in Sonney’s bill include requirements staff be properly certified and specific student-to-teacher ratios be adhered to for core subjects.

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