

Testimony of Teresa Woods
Lighthouse Connections Academy
April 27, 2023

Chair Weiss,

My name is Teresa Woods, I am the Executive Director at Lighthouse Connections Academy. Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on the importance of cyber charter schools and equal funding for all students.

I have more than 25 years of experience working with children and families. I began my career as an at-risk school social worker, mental health clinician and managed a large child welfare agency. I have also held leadership positions in both private and public charter schools before joining Lighthouse Connections Academy. I believe that every child deserves to learn in an environment that best serves their learning style and family needs. It is my hope that each child enrolled at Lighthouse Connections Academy will develop a curiosity for learning, discover their interests, and grow in their love of learning.

Our students are diverse. We have a large population of students who are from urban cities and counties across the state such as Detroit, Flint, and Saginaw. A significant amount, 36% qualify for free and reduced lunch and 20% of our students receive special education services. In total we serve 2500 students who are enrolled from around the State of Michigan. We also serve a number of students who didn't do well during COVID-19 pandemic at a traditional brick and mortar schools, and we are helping them recover academically.

I am here today as I am very concerned about the proposed budget cuts for students enrolled in cyber charter schools. It is surprising to me that anyone would think to cut funding for some of the most vulnerable students in Michigan. It is especially troubling to me as the Michigan Department of Education has identified 10 strategic education goals for our state, of which number eight is to "Provide adequate and equitable school funding."¹ I know that each of the 21, 219 students enrolled in cyber charter schools² in this state is deserving of adequate and equitable school funding.

Families are sending their students to cyber charter schools for many reasons, and I believe students should be in a learning environment that is best for them. Cyber charter schools are not just schools of convenience nor is the virtual education subpar. We provide an educational environment for students in Michigan that is safe, has a flexible learning environment, meets students where they are academically and provides individualized learning. We work with students who are medically fragile, are single mothers, help provide income for their household, as well as students who are high-achievers or travel with a highly competitive sports program.

¹ [Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#)

² Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), MI School Data, 2021-2022 School Year

We follow all state and federal laws, regulations and in some instances are asked to meet higher standards or additional requirements just because our students sit within the confines of four walls at traditional brick and mortar school.

A cut in funding for cyber charter schools may result in scaled back services for students and less staff such as interventionists, counselors and teachers. While this cut may not mean a lot to you, it will send a message to teaching staff, parents and more importantly students. It will tell the kids in these schools that just because they don't sit in the four walls of a schoolhouse they aren't deserving of equitable funding.

At LCA we have had students enrolled:

- With severe anxiety who was preventing her from being successful at one of the best high schools in Detroit. She was able to graduate with us and begin her college pathway.
- A student who was a professional figure skater. On the road a lot. We were able to meet the needs of this family.
- A single dad who was a truck driver that took his child with him on the road. Because of us, this student was able to stay on track and not miss time in school.

LCA met the needs of a Michigan family with a 3rd grade student that has a rare form of Neuroblastoma. Their son was smart, funny and loving. As a toddler they knew he was special, he was able to walk, stand and speak before his developmentally appropriate age. He seemed to naturally gravitate to books. His parents were faithful in reading to him daily. From the time he could speak his goal was to go to school. He was so looking forward to turning 5 and attending kindergarten. Just shy of his 5th birthday, they received the devastating diagnosis. The only aspect that their precious son was sad about was that he may miss school. As it turned out due to his health he did miss out on kindergarten and 1st grade. As his disease took hold of him, he still had one wish to attend school. His parents begin to research home school options when they found Lighthouse Connections Academy. LCA allowed their son to realize his dream of being a student. I would love to tell you this wonderful little boy went on to live a full life, but that was not the case, but LCA offered him an opportunity to experience joy even during his short life.

I will leave you with some food for thought. A recent poll conducted on behalf of the National Coalition for Public School Options³ found that:

- 80 percent of Michigan voters support allowing parents to choose to send their kids to the best school available to them, regardless of geographical boundaries.
- 65 percent of voters agree that every student should have access to full-time virtual schools. Reasons as to why include bullying, school safety and medical issues.
- 86 percent of voters agree that all students should be funded equally in the state.

Thank you again, for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the students at Lighthouse Connections Academy and all students enrolled in a cyber charter school and share

³ WPA Intelligence Poll Conducted for the National Coalition for Public School Options of likely voters in Michigan between February 1-4, 2023

with you the importance of fulfilling the Michigan Department of Education's goal of providing adequate and equitable funding for students in Michigan.

Testimony of Bryan Klochack
Michigan Connections Academy
April 27, 2023

Chair Weiss,

My name is Bryan Klochack and I am the district Superintendent for Michigan Connections Academy (MICA). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Governor Whitmer's 2024 proposed budget.

I have been an educator for 30 years in K-12 public and private schools and have dedicated my career to the students and families in Michigan. I have been with MICA for 13 years since the school opened. MICA is a K-12 cyber charter school that serves students from across the state of Michigan. We have over 1650 students enrolled from Northern Michigan, Mid-Michigan, to Southeast Michigan and everywhere in between. Our students are diverse, with over 60% eligible for free and reduced lunch and 18% of our students have an IEP or 504 Plan.

Since Proposal A passed in 1994 Democrat and Republican legislators have worked to equally fund all students regardless of their zip code or the type of public school they attend. It was only a few years ago that we finally reached funding parity for all public schools in Michigan. Now that the legislature has recognized that every student is worth the same when it comes to per pupil funding, there is another proposed cut in funding for cyber charter school students which is included in this year's budget recommendation.

The budget recommendation proposes a 20% per pupil cut for cyber charter school students as compared to the funding recommendation for every other student in Michigan. This represents a \$42 million dollar cut in a \$10.5 billion budget, a drop in the bucket¹.

The budget proposal sends a message to the 21,000 plus students and families who are enrolled in cyber charter schools that they are worth less than every other kid in public schools. To put this in context there are 21,219 students enrolled in a cyber charter school which is the equivalent of 1.47% of the total enrolled Michigan student population, or 1.47% of 1.4 million students. I am here to tell you, unequivocally, that the 1,600+ students enrolled at Michigan Connections Academy, the 2,500 enrolled at Lighthouse Connections Academy and the 950 enrolled at Great Lakes Learning Academy are NOT worth less than any other student enrolled in a public school in Michigan. By proposing a funding cut for students who attend a cyber school you are publicly saying that they are worth less just because of how they access their education.

Currently, Michigan is an example to other states in terms of funding equity with per pupil spending. The students enrolled at a full-time cyber charter school are just as important and

¹ Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget Recommendation Education Briefing Papers February 8, 2023

deserving of equal funding as a student who attends a brick-and-mortar public school or who attends a full-time virtual program at their local public school.

I know that there are many misconceptions about cyber schools and as an educator I would like to take the time to provide some information to you.

- There are students enrolled in a full-time cyber charter school from every county in Michigan².
- 96% of brick-and-mortar public schools have at least one student enrolled in a cyber charter school.
- Cyber charter schools follow state and federal laws and regulations.
- The teachers are Michigan certified teachers.
- We serve a unique population of the students. those we serve have attended multiple public brick-and-mortar schools, have been bullied, are immune compromised, are suffering from mental health issues, and need flexibility in learning based on their circumstances.
- Even at equal per pupil funding, cyber charter schools receive less funding, as they do not have access to sinking funds and cannot ask their community to vote to support school millages.
- Cyber charter schools have similar costs as brick-and-mortar public schools, such as:
 - Salaries and benefits for teaching and administrative staff as well as technology and software for all employees.
 - Professional development costs
 - Curriculum costs related to instruction
 - Accreditation costs
 - Central Office Costs such as human resources, state reporting, Special Education administration and oversight, enrollment and records management, audits etc.
- We also have costs that are NOT borne by brick-and-mortar public schools, such as:
 - Technology, this is infrastructure, a platform, curriculum development, curriculum etc.
 - Computers and related technology for in-home use, including ISP processing fees and reimbursement costs to families.
 - State testing, to comply with state assessments we provide statewide testing throughout the state, at a cost of approximately \$1 million annually.

²Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, Schools of Choice and Other Non-resident Enrollment, 2021-2022

- There is a cost for multiple testing locations and for staff travel and accommodations to administer the test
- Educational materials and manipulatives for in-home use as well as the cost of mailing education materials to students' homes.
- **86 percent of Michigan parents** believe that all students should be funded equally, regardless of which public school they attend³.

Lastly, I want to share with you some stories of success of our students here at MICA. As mentioned, we have nearly 18% of our students on and IEP or 504 plan, 16% IEP, and I want to share a couple of their stories with you to showcase their successes in our setting as to what they experienced elsewhere.

We have a student who qualifies under deaf and hard of hearing. She has a special education teacher, supports from a social worker and supports from a teacher consultant of the deaf and hard of hearing. She could not hear in the traditional setting. Even with the amplification system the noise and distractions significantly impacted her success. She has a desire to do well but failed all classes in a traditional brick and mortar setting. Since joining our school she has improved her grades substantially and is on track for graduation. She is learning how to advocate for her needs and ask for assistance when needed.

We had a student who was eligible under an emotional impairment. He was kicked out of school frequently and struggled with emotional regulation. He swore at teachers, was physically aggressive and struggled to engage socially. He joined our school and the triggers from before became virtually nonexistent. His mother had the active role in education with her student that she wanted and their relationship become closer than before. During his time with us he was diagnosed with liver cancer. With our instruction being virtual he was still able to go to school and access all his services. He graduated cancer free 2 years ago.

We had a student with an eligibility of Other Health Impairment. He had significant health issues. He missed a substantial amount of school in a traditional brick and mortar due to his compromised health issues and he was barely passing his classes. Being home allowed him to be healthy and access his schoolwork and services. His senior year he earned all As and graduated on time. He was accepted into a local community college and was excited for the next phase.

We had a student who was eligible under Autism Spectrum Disorder. In a traditional brick and mortar, he was in a self-contained AI classroom due to the severity of his behavioral and social needs. Joining MICA allowed him to participate in a resource room environment where he went to all his traditional classes with his peers. He engaged during LiveLessons and was able to take advanced courses as he was extremely intelligent. When he graduated, he had a scholarship to his local college. This was a huge accomplishment for him.

³ PSO Survey

It is my belief that those in charge should focus on a more important issues such as outcomes for students. Specifically, addressing the school accountability system where they place special education students who are appropriately placed in certificate of completion programs in the same category as students who drop out of school and negatively impact the graduation rate of schools. In so doing schools have been placed erroneously and unfairly into the CSI (Comprehensive Support and Improvement) category by MDE and the true success rate of schools statewide are not computed or shared accurately and appropriately. Special education students who are appropriately placed in a certificate of completion program via FAPE are categorized as dropouts and count as such in graduation rate percentages.

All educators in every mode of instruction wake up every day to serve and succeed with students and families. It is my hope that the legislature wakes up every day thinking about ways to help students succeed academically and in life no matter how their education is delivered. We are excited for the increased investment in education here in Michigan, however we hope this increase in funding to occur for our model and our students and to be funded and viewed as equals to all other students in this state.

Thank you for allowing me to submit written testify on behalf of the students enrolled at Michigan Connections Academy, Lighthouse Connections Academy, Great Lakes Learning Academy and every student and family in Michigan who attend a cyber charter school.