



## POSITION PAPER

### **Bear Creek Community Charter High School**

*The rationale behind the decision not to include an expansion into high school as part of Bear Creek Community Charter School's strategic plan.*

#### **Introduction**

Bear Creek Community Charter School originated as a grass-roots movement among parents and members of the greater Bear Creek community, following the Wilkes-Barre Area School District's decision to close Bear Creek Elementary School. A large group of citizens began investigating the relatively new concept of opening a public charter school. The group eventually grew to more than 100 dedicated volunteers and many more supporters who engaged in hands-on renovations, fundraising and advocacy.

The battle to open Luzerne County's first public charter school was just that, a battle. It lasted two years, with multiple legal steps involving the local school board, the Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas, and the Pennsylvania Charter Appeals Board in Harrisburg. Along the way, there were many denials, contentious public meetings, and tens of thousands of dollars were invested in legal fees.

In the end, the committed group of volunteers persevered. In August 2004, the Pennsylvania Charter Appeals Board cleared the way for the opening of Bear Creek Community Charter School. The 2018-2019 school year marks the start of Bear Creek Community Charter School's 15<sup>th</sup> year in operation. Today the School offers a safe and nurturing environment for children, a solid academic program, and ongoing opportunities for student growth.

Bear Creek Community Charter School has proven that it is not just "an experiment in education" as some of our early detractors suggested. The school has become known as a reputable educational institution, providing parents of 468 children from across the Wyoming Valley a real choice in public education.

With the success of Luzerne County's first and only public charter school, the demand for options beyond 8<sup>th</sup> grade is evident among parents. Administrators and trustees are continually asked about the possibility of extending the school's programming through high school.

## Existing Public Charter Schools

As of October 3, 2017 the Pennsylvania Department of Education reports there are 164 “brick and mortar” public charter schools operating in Pennsylvania. The following is a summary of the number of approved public charter schools by grade levels:

<u>Grade Levels</u>	<u>Schools*</u>	<u>%</u>
Elementary (K-8)	90	55%
High School (6-12)	36	22%
Middle School (5-8)	8	5%
Full Service (K-12)	30	18%

\* Cyber charter school programs not included.

## A Difficult Decision

Every three to five years, the Board of Trustees convenes a multi-day strategic planning event where trustees, school administrators and other key stakeholders gather for an in-depth discussion regarding the short term and long term future of Bear Creek Community Charter School. These intense workshops provide an opportunity to reflect on our past, review stakeholder feedback, and identify opportunities for continuous improvement. This process also allows for those involved to develop a strategic plan to ensure long-term success.

Discussions regarding expanding Bear Creek Community Charter School to include a high school is always a hot topic, as it is the issue we hear the most about from parents. The pursuit of such an endeavor is very complicated. Without a solid plan with a high degree of confidence, pursuing expansion to include high school can easily undermine our current success, and put the entire future of Bear Creek Community Charter School at risk.

A charter revision to expand grade levels is a major undertaking, with a considerable investment in time and resources, which would detract from the School’s short-term goals and operations. Therefore, pursuing a charter revision for a high school is not part of Bear Creek Community Charter School’s current (5-10 year) strategic plan.

## Considerations & Concerns

There are many complicated issues that need to be considered relating to a charter high school, some of which we have attempted to outline below.

1. Legal & Contractual Considerations. Bear Creek Community Charter School has a charter with the Wilkes-Barre Area School District, which is a legal contract governing the operation of the charter school. This agreement only permits the charter school to operate programs for students enrolled in kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Expanding beyond 8<sup>th</sup> grade would require approval from the Wilkes-Barre Area School District, which is something we do not believe would be easily achieved based on the current political and fiscal environment facing the District. If the Wilkes-Barre Area School District were to deny a request from Bear Creek Community Charter School to expand grade levels, which would be expected, a protracted and costly legal process would ensue, which could take multiple years to resolve. This would also divert financial resources away from the educational process (to cover litigation costs) for both the charter school and the district.
2. Facility Expansion. Construction of a larger facility would be required to accommodate the additional students in grades nine through twelve for not only homeroom, but also for each subject area required to provide diversity in academic programming (biology and chemistry labs, foreign language classrooms, etc.). Construction would create disruption on campus, including the educational program for the existing students, and would require the school to assume significantly more debt, creating long-term budget concerns.
3. Professional Staff & Certification. The balance between academic offerings required to operate a public high school, the additional staff, and the limited population of the charter school, would create a much lower student-to-staff ratio. A lower student-to-staff ratio without additional funding would be detrimental. The Pennsylvania Department of Education requires specific certifications for each course, which would limit the pool of applicants for each position and would prevent professional staff from teaching classes in which they were not properly certified – therefore teachers would not be fully utilized.
4. Long Term Financial Stability. Providing quality educational programming for high school students' costs more than providing quality educational programming for elementary school students. This is the result of the diversity in academic offerings, space requirements, extra-curricular activities, etc. These factors would lead to much higher long-term operating costs, placing the financial viability of the overall school at risk. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools cannot generate additional revenue through taxation – they must “live within their means.”

5. Social & Cultural Considerations. Maintaining a small-school environment is important to the School's founders and continues to be a critical factor in maintaining the school's culture. A small student population among high school students creates various challenges, such as ensuring diversity, competitiveness in extra-curricular athletics, as well as social concerns regarding other extra-curricular and social activities.