NORTH CAROLINA'S LARGE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT CONSORTIUM

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Johnston County Schools
Wake County Schools

April 1, 2014

As superintendents of North Carolina's largest public school districts that provide a wide array of high quality school choice options for students, we strongly support efforts to maintain, enhance and increase those options for students in one, well-coordinated, effective system of public education. We support the expansion of virtual learning options for students, and ask North Carolina leaders to establish virtual learning options that are successful for all North Carolina students. The North Carolina Virtual Charter School report submitted to the State Board of Education overlooked several key items, including quality and student access, which must be taken into account as the state considers implementation of virtual charter schools. Before growing virtual charter schools in our state, policymakers should identify and address the following issues:

(1) **Virtual Charter Schools have failed to meet standards of quality nation-wide.**
   - According to the National Education Policy Center, virtual schools (charter and otherwise) maintain a 37.6% on-time graduation rate relative to 79.4% among brick-and-mortar public schools nationally. Further, fewer than 30% of virtual schools met AYP in 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12. Finally, 71.9% of virtual schools were deemed "academically unacceptable" in 2011-12[1]. These are not the high quality schools that should expand across our state.
   - Among high performing students in Colorado (students who scored at or above proficient on the state test), 14% of full-time online students dropped out compared to 1.8% state-wide. In Minnesota, one out of four students enrolled in a full-time virtual school dropped out[2].
   - Policy makers should review the charter schools that have low quality student achievement records nation-wide and ensure they are not able to open schools in North Carolina.

(2) **The Virtual Charter School report fails to ensure a minimum quality curriculum and instruction for students.**
   - While other states require virtual charter schools to submit curricular materials to the State Board for approval prior to opening, the proposed NC policy does not. As we move into the era of higher standards for students, it is a glaring oversight that virtual charter schools will not be held to the same high standards.

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[1] Research paper: http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/nepc-virtual-2013-section-1-2.pdf
[2] Research paper: http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/virtual-2014-2-research-final.pdf

- Additionally, the high teacher student ratio of 1:40 as outlined in the report calls into question the ability of Virtual Charter Schools to meet every students' need.

(3) **The Virtual Charter School proposal fails to account for equity and access concerns.**
- Given the challenges with the Digital Learning Transition in North Carolina, there are huge barriers to assuring access to virtual charter schools for every 4student, particularly those in high-need areas. Until North Carolina has appropriately invested in providing its public schools with access to digital learning resources, we should not consider allocating resources to further exacerbate the digital divide.

(4) **The funding structure proposed in the report must take into account the actual cost of instruction for virtual charter schools.**
- Despite the fact that virtual schools have fewer teachers and fewer overhead costs, the report recommends that the state will provide virtual schools with the full funding per pupil as given to traditional public schools. This indicates potential inefficiency and fiscal irresponsibility.

(5) **Virtual Charter Schools cannot meet the needs of early learnings, particularly those in Elementary School.**
- While many states have limited Virtual Charter School policies to apply to 7-12th grades, the proposal before the State Board does not. Teaching students to read via computer is developmentally inappropriate and fails to meet the needs of emerging learners.

(6) **Until there is a demonstrated record of success in virtual charter schools state-wide, North Carolina should not allow virtual charter schools to enroll high numbers of students.**
- The recommendation before the board recommends that three virtual charter schools be established during a pilot program and be allowed to enroll 2,000 students each in the first year and then expand by 20% each year thereafter.
- If these schools prove to be ineffective, it will adversely affect the students enrolled in the virtual schools and it will inadvertently hurt students in the public schools which lose funding as a result of the students leaving. If the state chooses to establish a pilot program it should be more reasonable in size.