

Good morning. Thank you for allowing me to address you today. My name is Dr. Kris Enright. I am the assistant state director for GOAL Academy. I am also the Vice President of the Colorado Cyberschool Association. I am the Colorado League of Charter schools Membership Council online representative, the online consulting expert for the Association of American Educators, and serve as board president of Calvert Academy, one of Colorado's highest performing online schools.

Over the last 25 years, I have taught in brick and mortar and online settings. I have served as an elementary, middle, and high school brick and mortar and online principal. I have taught at the community college and graduate school level. For more than 15 years, I have studied, led, taught, and consulted in online schools. I have participated in numerous online panels and research studies. I helped create one of Colorado's first online principal licensure programs. I have evaluated online charter applications for the Colorado Charter School Institute, have served on online school evaluation teams, and have served as an online consultant in more than twenty five districts, schools, and organizations across the country and here in Colorado.

I appreciate this commission's efforts towards developing district online authorization standards and pilot programs. I support your work to ensure that every Colorado student has the opportunity to attend a high quality online school. However, I take exception to two comments which have been oft repeated during your prior meetings, without counter. Today, I am here to challenge these statements and offer two reminders to this commission.

Reminder Number One:

Colorado's children are not the property of the district in which they and their families live.

Twenty four years ago, The Public Schools of Choice Act of 1990 afforded families the right to enroll their children in any Colorado school, including schools outside their district of residence. 1993's Charter Schools Act and 1998's online education bill both provided families with additional innovative school choices, further promoting Colorado parents' rights to select a school which best meets the needs of their children, not limited to the district in which they live.

My wife and I share this belief. We have chosen to enroll eight of our ten children in online education programs offered outside the district in which we live. Because we have been able to enroll our children in schools of choice, our children have been able to volunteer at food banks, animal rescues, and homeless shelters. Our children have been able to devote time to church and community activities, scouting, athletics, and college through concurrent enrollment. As a result of our ability to choose programs not offered by the district in which we live, our two older sons earned their eagle scouts, high school diplomas, and associate degrees at eighteen and are now serving two year missions in Chile and Argentina. Our daughter earned her Bachelors degree from CSU at age 20 with a 4.0 and is now serving a mission in Texas. All are paying for missions or college themselves with money they earned while working part-time and attending an online school. Our other children are all on track to do the same thing.

Thus, I as well as many others are troubled by members of this commission who have at every commission meeting repeatedly accused online schools of enrolling THEIR students.

These children of which you speak are not your property, nor that of any district in which they live. Students who attend online schools, like tens of thousands of other students and their parents have examined their school options and have chosen to enroll their children in a school that best meets their needs.

My online colleagues and I are not alone in placing the interests of families and children ahead of those of districts of residence. This belief is evidently shared by the Colorado Charter School Institute. For, according to CSI's 2013 strategic plan, in outlining its strategies "to remove or reduce the statutory barrier that restricts CSI from authorizing and supporting charter schools in the vast majority of districts in Colorado...Exclusive chartering authority serves to ensure that the geographic district has first right of refusal to authorize new charter schools in its boundaries. While it is understandable and clearly serves the district's interests, it does not consistently ensure that charter schools have a choice in authorization providers. This limitation on choice is not believed to be in the interest of the schools and families they serve."

I, like many others agree with CSI. Parents, not districts should be able to choose what is best for their children. And, the school in which those children are enrolled, whether they are online or traditional within or outside a district, are bound to do whatever it takes to meet those needs and provide the student with the best possible chance for success.

I therefore encourage commission members to be mindful when referring to students. They are not property. Instead, as educators we all share in the responsibility to work together with families to serve all students, providing a variety of options, either online, blended or traditional, which meet the full spectrum of student needs and are not limited to the options their local district chooses to provide.

Reminder Number Two:

Colorado's students, their teachers, and schools should not be snubbed, maligned, or treated as inferiors simply because they learn, teach, and operate online.

Whether it's because online schools are different, a threat to the status quo, or for whatever reason, over the last 15 years, Colorado online students, online educators, and online schools have been treated differently, of lesser worth, often with complete disdain and an utter lack of respect. Online schools have been the focus of witch-hunt-like accusations, often designed to misdirect public opinion, foster panic, often using inaccurate information which serves to justify unequal treatment.

For many years, different from traditional schools, Colorado families couldn't enroll their children into online schools without first attending a semester in a brick and mortar setting. At one point, different from traditional schools, CDE staff determined that students couldn't enroll in online schools if they had earned D's or F's in their prior school. A short time later, again different from traditional schools, online schools were told that only wet signatures would be allowed on certain enrollment documents.

Again different from traditional schools, for more than a decade, online schools have been required to provide ever changing and ever-increasing data for October count, now a massive sixty day effort, in some cases submitting thousands of data points over an 11 day window, only to be overruled by a traditional school which claimed a student who spent 10 minutes in the school office to pay a library or lost book fee. This fall, if a family elects to enroll their child in an online school, regardless of the funding level of their neighborhood school, their child's online school will receive different funding, the lower online rate.

For many online students once referred to by a state authority as, pasty white-skinned students who spend their days on computers in basements, the last 15 years have been especially challenging. Across the state, some local districts have refused to forward student records to online schools, have forbidden online students to attend dances or other public events, have sought to prevent online students from participating on school or community sports teams, or have even told online students when they come to their local school to pick up a sibling that they are trespassing and must leave immediately or the police will be contacted. These students were "theirs" up until they enrolled in an online school. Then they became outsiders.

For more than a decade, my online peers and I have attended meetings like this, treated as second class educators, accused of "stealing kids," even as we continue to serve thousands of students who have not been served by or who have been asked to leave their local district, sometimes actually driven to our offices by local school district staff and told to enroll in our online school.

At the last meeting of this commission, one commission member referred to my online school, stating "they are eager to enroll students on October first but quick to send them back [to the local district] on November first." With all due respect, I submit to this group that this is inaccurate. In response, please consider one of GOAL's education zones located in that same Colorado Springs district, opened in fall 2013 to serve the needs of nearby students. At this Education Zone, different students drop-in daily for 30 to 90 minutes to meet with counselors, obtain tech support, receive tutoring, or participate in proctored testing.

Since opening the site, 44 students from the local district have chosen to enroll in GOAL:

- 33 are still with GOAL
- 5 have graduated.
- 1 has moved out of state
- 1 has transferred to a different district in State
- 1 has transferred to job corp.
- 2 dropped out of school
- 1 returned to the local district

And who are these students, of the 44 students who came from the local district:

- 2 had been committed to Department of Human services following adjudication

- 33 came with truancy issues
- 6 have drug/alcohol issues
- 5 have parents with drug/alcohol issues
- 5 have parents in prison, on parole/probation
- 6 are parents
- 5 have experienced domestic violence
- 5 have histories of repeated school suspensions
- 3 have a documented history of serious psychiatric or behavioral disorders
- 6 were expelled or instructed by their local district to “not come back”

These students came to GOAL from their local district an averaged of 3.72 credits behind where they should have been and ranged from 2 to 5 grade levels behind in math and reading.

When asked why they came to GOAL, reasons included: bullying, drama, a lack of individual attention, the need to work full time, the death of a baby, anger issues, or were told by their district not to come back. These students and their families chose GOAL Academy in response to their unmet needs. We at GOAL are working desperately to serve these students and, like we do across the state in many other districts, we are very willing to work with the local district to find innovative ways to help these students.

Online schools, online teachers, and online students may be different, but those differences shouldn't lead to animosity, false accusations, and continuing second class treatment accompanied by higher expectations than those placed on traditional counterparts. Online schools are largely run by passionate educators who, like those in traditional schools, want all students to succeed. Most of us in online came from traditional schools, but saw too many students failing, leaving the system, and wanted to do something about it.

Like traditional schools, online schools are not perfect but are working hard towards perfection. Online schools share common goals and accountability requirements with traditional schools and are more similar than different. Originally ignored, then laughed at, then hated, now emulated, online education will be a part of all our futures. We have much to share and learn from one another if we can simply stop pointing fingers, stop obsessing about our differences, outgrow our compulsion to discriminate, and collaborate to serve all students.

So, as you consider how to empower districts to authorize online schools, as you imagine potential online pilot programs, I encourage this commission to be mindful of our shared responsibility to work towards serving all of our students regardless of how or where they go to school.

Thank you.