

# Our Taxes, Their Slush Fund

February 2025

How a cyber charter school spends Pennsylvanians' tax dollars on dining, hotels, travel, entertainment, and more.

## \*\*Revision Note

There were minor data discrepancies in our original report that was published on January 27, 2025. After Ed Voters was made aware of these discrepancies, we manually matched each line of the entries in our data set against the original PDFs we received from CCA and updated the data used in the report.

This report, which was published on February 3, 2025, has been updated with corrected data. A spreadsheet that contains detailed information along with new total spending for categories in the report is attached.

## Summary

In this report, we examine Commonwealth Charter Academy's check registers (obtained through Right to Know requests) from the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years.

As public governmental agencies, cyber charter schools are generally expected to make their financial matters accessible to the public. As a matter of public interest, these records should be redacted or left incomplete only when there is a valid and legally justifiable reason to do so.

After an examination of the 2022-2023 check register batch, Education Voters of PA filed additional Right to Know requests for invoices that are connected to specific checks in order to better understand what was actually purchased. These requests were filed on October 31, 2024, and November 21, 2024. At the time this revised paper was published on February 3, 2025, CCA had not fulfilled these requests.

The May 2021 through June 2022 check registers contained more than 4,700 checks totaling more than \$2.2 million that were fully redacted. Education Voters was unable to conduct a meaningful examination of expenditures in these check registers due to the heavy redaction of information.

The check registers from July 2022 through June 2023 included approximately 4,600 entries that we examine in this reports. CCA coded entries with redacted names as "family mentor," "student/caretaker," and "staff," to ensure the privacy of individuals who received cash payments. This set of check registers is the only full school year of entries Education Voters has received where redacted information was labeled in this way. Ed Voters staff categorized and coded other expenditures in the check register cited in this report.



## Our examination found that from July 2022-June 2023:


- CCA made 456 payments totaling more than \$116,000 for dining.
- CCA made 193 payments totaling more than \$405,000 for entertainment, including \$4000 to the Hill Society where CCA is listed as a platinum corporate partner on the website.
- CCA made 52 payments totaling more than \$603,000 to car dealerships and car washes.
- CCA made 280 payments totaling more than \$407,000 to dozens of stores for unidentified shopping expenses.
- CCA made 2404 payments totaling more than \$1.2 million in cash payments to CCA families that were coded “family mentor” or “student/caretaker.”
- CCA made 770 payments totaling more than \$626,000 that were coded “staff.”

Moreover, we found the following specific expenses:

- Checks paid to Mazza Vineyards, Duke’s Riverside Bar, Dockside Willies, O'Reilly's Taproom, the Lancaster Brewing Company, Cork & Fork, and dozens of other restaurants.
- Entertainment at the Green Ridge Club, the Camelback Lodge, the Moscow Ballet, the Maid of the Mist, Faith Haven Stables, the Chattanooga Zoo, and many other entertainment venues.
- A \$4000 payment to the Hill Society, where members, “Celebrate the good stuff. Wine. Food. Whiskey. Getaways and special events.”


**It is a violation of the public trust when cyber charter schools use tax dollars as a fund for expenses not directly related to the education of children.**

The staggering lack of transparency for redacted expenditures and the misuse of tax dollars that are intended to be spent educating children demand immediate increased accountability and transparency for Commonwealth Charter Academy, including a forensic audit to ensure that spending has been in compliance with state laws.




**Our goal is simple.**

Celebrate the good stuff. Wine. Food. Whiskey. Getaways and special events. Member benefits start at our valet stand, and continue into our club room. Book a trip, meet friends or family for dinner, or relax and unwind over a cocktail. Your haven awaits.



**Our platinum corporate partners:**



**The Hill Society Platinum  
Corporate Partnership**  
\$4000.00  
Check # 14776  
Date: 3/17/2023

## Background

Pennsylvania has 14 cyber charter schools. These are privately-operated public schools that are granted a charter and authorized to operate by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Any student can attend any cyber charter school no matter what school district they live in. School districts are required by state law to make tuition payments for students who live in their districts and enroll in cyber charter schools. **These tuition payments total more than \$1 billion annually and are made up primarily of property tax dollars that are collected at the local level in each district.**

The state sets charter school tuition rates for each district that are based on the cost of educating students in their home school districts' buildings. This means school districts pay the same tuition for students who attend brick-and-mortar and cyber charter schools. In 2024-2025 regular education tuition rates for cyber charter students range from \$7,659 to \$28,959 per student per year.<sup>1</sup> Special education tuition rates for cyber charter students range from \$18,627 to \$63,019 per student in the 2024-2025 school year, regardless of the cost of services required by the student.

These equivalent tuition rates may seem sensible at first glance, but operationally, they do not add up. Cyber charter schools educate students at home on a computer, not in a brick-and-mortar school. Cyber charter schools do not provide students with gym, recess, libraries, laboratories, or music and art classrooms. They do not need to employ security or maintenance/custodial staff or heat, cool, and maintain school district facilities and grounds. **Their operational and overhead costs simply do not add up to equal those of traditional public schools – yet they receive the same amount of funding per student.**

As a result, Pennsylvania's cyber charter schools are awash in excess funding. The Education Voters of PA report<sup>2</sup> from May 2024 documents the degree to which this funding surplus has ballooned: the staggering growth of cyber charter asset hoards, the real estate empire that at least one cyber charter school is acquiring, and the gross waste of tax dollars by these schools on advertising costs.

**The tax dollars cyber charters waste come primarily from property taxes paid by Pennsylvanians to their school districts.**

These tax dollars are taken away from school districts that must account for every dollar they spend in public meetings and have oversight from locally elected school boards. These dollars are taken away from school districts that are unconstitutionally underfunded by more than \$4 billion and that lack basic and essential resources that students need to be successful academically. They are taken away from school districts that are forced to raise property taxes year in and year out – so that they can pay cyber charter tuition bills that grossly exceed what these schools actually need to educate students at home on a computer.

# Summary of Findings from the 2022-2023 Commonwealth Charter Academy Check Register

## Fully Redacted Payments

Check registers obtained through the Right to Know process from May 2021 through June 2022 contained **more than 4700 checks that were fully redacted, totaling more than \$2.2 million.** The smallest check was for \$15.00 and the largest was for \$22,125. Ed Voters reviewed the material, but the extensive redaction prevented a meaningful examination of expenditures in these check registers due to the heavy redaction of information.

## Cash Payments To CCA Families

In the 2022-2023 cash registers, **CCA made 1203 payments totaling more than \$814,000 that were coded “family mentors.”** Payments ranged from \$200 to \$3,750. Most payments were for \$550 beginning in September and this amount appears to have been doubled in the months of November and May.

**CCA also made 1201 cash payments to families totaling more than \$419,000 that were coded “student/caretaker.”** These payments ranged from \$30.00 to \$7,425.00.

## Cash Payments To Staff

CCA made **770 payments totaling more than \$626,000** that were coded “staff.”

Ed Voters filed a Right to Know Request on June 13, 2024, seeking “[c]ontracts, agreements and any other documentation that details the work or services provided by the vendors/entities that are redacted and are receiving the payments.” CCA responded on July 22nd with a denial of this request stating that “CCA does not have any records in its possession, custody, or control that are responsive to your request as submitted.” \*\*

## Dining

**CCA spent more than \$116,000 on payments for dining,** including \$2,739.70 to Door Dash, \$5,504.00 to Mazza Vineyards and hundreds of other payments to dozens of restaurants across the commonwealth including Dockside Willies, Cork and Fork, Chick-Fil-A, Chipotle, Cracker Barrel, Texas Roadhouse, El Rodeo, Primanti Brothers, El Limon, Boro Bar & Grill, Burgatory, Sweetgreen, Buffalo Wild Wings, TGI Friday’s, Slice, Romano’s, Giligans, Himalayan Fusion, Penns Tavern, Shogun Restaurant, Duke’s Riverside Bar, Franco’s Lounge, Shake Shack, the White Rose Bar and Grill, and Kona Ice.

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\*\* In a RTK response, CCA noted, “Pursuant to section 706 of the RTKL, 65 P.S. § 67.706, the following information was redacted from the record: the names of caretakers that received payments under CCA’s Community Class Reimbursement program; names of family mentors who perform services for CCA, including assisting newly enrolled families with successfully transitioning to CCA and online learning; and the names of staff who received payments under CCA’s Tuition Reimbursement program,”

## **Entertainment**

CCA made **193 payments totaling more than \$405,000 for entertainment entertainment and recreational activities**, including payments to dozens of venues including the following: the Pittsburgh Ballet, Falling Water, Maid of the Mist, Hersheypark, Hershey Entertainment, Top Golf Pittsburgh, USA Ninja Nook, Dave & Busters, Monkey Joes, Faith Haven Stables, the Carlisle Sports Emporium, Sky Zone, Urban Air Trampoline, the Green Ridge Club, the Camelback Lodge, the Chattanooga Zoo, and 814 Lanes and Games.

CCA also paid \$4000 to the Hill Society and is listed on their website as a platinum corporate partner, where members, “Celebrate the good stuff. Wine. Food. Whiskey. Getaways and special events. With access to 200 reciprocal clubs in the US and beyond, you’re never far from the best things every city has to offer.”

## **Unidentified Shopping Expenses**

CCA made **280 payments totaling more than \$407,000 to dozens of stores** including Amazon, Target, Home Depot, PetSmart, Party City, and Lowe’s. We have no information about what was purchased from these stores or who received these items.

## **Payments For Vehicles**

CCA made **52 payments totaling more than \$603,000** including \$115,387.41 paid to Fred Beans Ford and \$83,298.94 to LB Smith Ford.

As of this report’s publication, CCA had not fulfilled our Right to Know request seeking the invoices attached to these vehicle expenditures. We were, however, able to obtain four invoices from CCA for LB Smith Ford from 2024 that show CCA purchased a brand new \$58,832 2025 Agate Black Ford Explorer ST 4dr 4 x 4, and three new 2024 Ford Escapes that cost \$40,257 each (a trade allowance reduced the price of one vehicle by \$40,000). We do not know who drives these vehicles or for what purpose they are used.



**2025 Ford Explorer  
ST 4 Dr 4x4  
\$58,832.53  
Check # 65112  
Date: 7/27/24**



## Hotel Stays

CCA made 142 payments totaling more than \$206,000 to hotels. We do not know if these hotel rooms were for students and families, staff, executives, board members or a mix of all four.

## Lobbying

CCA spent more than \$217,500.00 on payments for lobbying services from McNees Strategic Solutions Group and Greenlee Partners.

## Gas Station Expenses

CCA spent nearly \$32,000 at gas stations throughout the commonwealth.

## Advertising and Promotion

CCA spent more than \$8.8 million on advertising and promotion. These will be detailed further in a forthcoming report.

Check # V16193  
Date: 7/25/2022



**\$ 89.46**

Check # V17399  
Date: 9/26/2022



**\$ 1,103.70**

Check #13050  
Date: 9/30/2022



Vinyard

**\$ 5,504.00**

Check # V16186  
Date: 7/25/2022



**\$ 142.95**

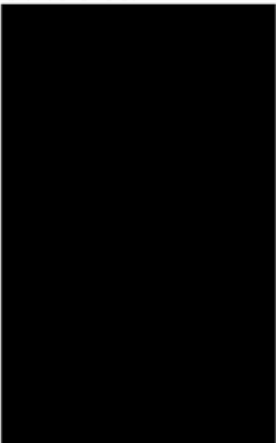
## Different standards for accountability and transparency

Cyber charter schools spend Pennsylvanians' tax dollars with far less transparency and accountability than the school districts from which they receive more than \$1 billion annually in tuition payments.

Pennsylvania's school boards are made up of individuals who have been elected by members of their community.<sup>3</sup> School boards hold public meetings in the evening. They post agendas, meeting minutes, and contracts online and they accept public comment. If a school district paid for the membership to an exclusive Harrisburg club, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on cash payments to families, or purchased a luxury vehicle, community members in that school district would know because there would be a public vote on these expenses at their local school board meeting. And if community members did not like these decisions, not only could they voice their concerns in public, they could vote out board members who made these decisions.

This is not the case with cyber charter schools. Cyber charter schools have boards that are appointed, not elected by the taxpayers who fund them. School districts send them more than \$1 billion annually – mostly from property taxes raised in their local communities – and cyber charter schools spend these dollars largely outside of the public eye.

In the case of CCA, their board meetings are held once each month in the morning with a publicly posted agenda that is available before meetings that contains few details. Information about what the board will be voting on and financial information about the school are not posted online prior to the meeting. Instead, anyone who plans to attend a meeting must request this information. CCA staff send that individual a link to a board packet of information. **These documents are never posted online.** And any documents that are not included in the board packet that is sent to requestors may only be obtained after meetings through Right to Know requests.

CHECK NUMBER	CHECK DATE	VENDOR NAME	TRANSACTION AMOUNT
V9423	07/27/21	BRAVO GROUP	102000.00
V9428	07/28/21		829.78
V9429	07/28/21		199.36
V9430	07/28/21		126.82
V9431	07/28/21		1590.00
V9432	07/28/21		1881.00
V9433	07/28/21		1545.00
V9434	07/28/21		1548.00
V9435	07/28/21		369.04
V9436	07/28/21		1566.00
V9437	07/28/21		1590.00
V9438	07/28/21		149.00
V9439	07/28/21		663.34
V9440	07/28/21		2322.00
V9441	07/28/21		2229.00
V9442	07/28/21		1548.00

**Excerpt from CCA's  
2021/2022 check register**

## Recommendations

The Pennsylvania legislature's continued failure to take action to end the excessive profiteering that is occurring in the cyber charter sector wastes property tax dollars, hurts home and business owners, and puts at risk our public schools' potential to deliver a quality education for all.

The General Assembly and the Governor's office must work together to take the following immediate actions:

- **The General Assembly must enact a flat tuition rate of \$9500 for each regular education student** who attends a cyber charter school beginning in the 2025-2026 school year. This will more closely align district payments to cyber charters with the actual cost of educating a student at home on a computer and reduce the excess funding sent to cyber charter schools.
- **The state must immediately open a forensic audit of Commonwealth Charter Academy** and other cyber charter schools to determine whether their expenditures and reporting have complied with state law. Completed forensic audits must be a condition of charter renewal.
- **The 2025-2026 state budget must include additional funding to hire staff in the Pennsylvania Department of Education** whose only job will be to work on the process of renewing the charters of cyber schools that are operating with expired charters (See Appendix A).
- **Beginning in the fall of 2025, school districts should be mandated to pay tuition to a cyber charter school ONLY if the school has a valid charter.**
- **The legislature must enact a moratorium on the approval of new cyber charter schools until all current cyber schools have valid charters.** It is wildly irresponsible for our state government to approve any new cyber charter school when it is unable to ensure basic, minimal accountability for existing cyber charter schools through the reauthorization process.



## Conclusion

Every dollar that CCA spends on Door Dash or luxury vehicles, or at brew pubs or vineyards or exclusive clubs, is a dollar that was paid by a Pennsylvania taxpayer.

These are dollars that are intended to be invested in educating the commonwealth's public school students. They could be used to pay for more teachers and counselors and nurses in students' classrooms. They could be used to reduce class sizes, hire aides, or pay for special education services. They could be used to fix leaky roofs, abate asbestos, or install HVAC systems.

State lawmakers must finally take steps to align cyber charter tuition payments with the cost of cybers providing online education. They must also enact reforms that will ensure accountability and transparency for cyber charter operations and spending so that Pennsylvanians can have faith that their school property taxes are being invested in providing educational opportunities for students, not used as a slush fund by CCA to pay for dining, entertainment and whatever else they currently enjoy on our dime.

## Sources

CCA check registry obtained through RTK by Education Voters of PA  
<https://bit.ly/CCAreg2022>

## Appendix A

Cyber Charter Renewals Spreadsheet

## Footnotes

1) Charter Schools Funding. Department of Education | Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/programs-and-services/instruction/elementary-and-secondary-education/charter-schools/charter-school-funding.html#accordion-0950237197-item-4002f57949>

2) Pennsylvania's cyber charter schools enjoy a 92,000% increase in asset hoards from 2018-2022, purchase dozens of properties, and waste more than \$21 million on advertising and gift cards in a single year. (2023). Education Voters of Pennsylvania. [https://edvoterspa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Final\\_Ed\\_Voters\\_Cyber\\_Charter\\_Asset\\_Hoard\\_Report-web.pdf](https://edvoterspa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Final_Ed_Voters_Cyber_Charter_Asset_Hoard_Report-web.pdf)

3) The School District of Philadelphia has a school board that is appointed by the city's mayor.

School Name	Renewal Date	Expiration of Charter
21st Century Cyber Charter School	2/19/2019	6/30/2024
Insight PA Cyber Charter School	Approved 11/10/ 2022	6/30/2029
PA Cyber Charter School	9/11/2019	6/30/2025
Pa Distance Learning Charter School	12/22/2023	6/30/2029
Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School	1/23/2019	6/30/2024
Reach Cyber Charter	10/5/2023	6/30/2029
Achievement House Charter School	No record found	
Agora Cyber Charter School	No record found	
ASPIRA Bilingual Cyber Charter School	No record found	
Central PA Digital Learning Foundation Cyber School	No record found	
Commonwealth Charter Academy	No record found	
Esperanza Cyber Charter School	No record found	
Pennsylvania Leader Charter School	No record found	

1 Charter Renewal Process and Decisions. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/programs-and-services/instruction/elementary-and-secondary-education/charter-schools/charter-renewal-process-and-decisions.html#accordion-b5aff0835f-item-cd25f0f384>