



SUMMIT

Charter School

Appendix X.
Founder Testimonial: SCS History and Need

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Summit Charter School Application - Founder Letter
More about How and Why Summit School Started

To Whom It May Concern:

I write this letter to accompany the Summit Charter School Charter Application, not only as a letter of support, but also as a way to provide context. I am the original founding member of Summit School of the Poconos, the private school whose model the Summit Charter School is based on. I serve as the Board President of the Summit School of the Poconos and plan to serve as the Board President of the Summit Charter School.

The Charter School Application asks about the founding coalition and asks for a representation of need. While facts and data can be included there, that information alone lacks a depth of something more meaningful and personal. I shared much of what I will write here with the Pocono Mountain School District during the hearing for the first charter application submitted by the school in November 2019. While this is written in part as a reaffirmation and reminder of my original words to the District, it is also written with the unfortunate knowledge that the ultimate audience of this letter will likely be the Pennsylvania Charter School Appeal Board.

Since Summit's announcement that the School was applying for a charter, many people have asked *why*? How is it that a student could benefit from a school that has *less* to offer - less students, less teachers, less extracurricular options than Pocono Mountain does? *Why* we're doing this seems to be just as important as *what* we're doing, so I'd like to try to explain that a little.

I've lived in Monroe County all my life. At one point or another, I attended three of the four local public schools, and I graduated from Stroudsburg High School. I made it through school just fine with A and B grades and very little need to study. I can't say that I was inspired in school, but I had no issues either. My husband had a similar experience and also graduated from Stroudsburg several years before me. I think we both came out okay. We both went on to achieve

professional success, we're happy, and we function in the larger world just fine.

Then we had a child and, without much thought, we enrolled our son, Mitchell, into the Stroudsburg Area School District. Prior to that, Mitchell had a great Pre K experience. He was curious, smart, and he *loved* preschool. He absolutely *loved* to learn.

But when Mitchell started Kindergarten, we were surprised that he thought of it as just "okay." A tiny bit of that spark, that curiosity he always had before, seemed to have faded. The one thing that seemed to save him that year was a phenomenal kindergarten teacher.

By first grade, Mitchell began to dislike school. He now viewed school as a chore, and any joy in learning became a thing of the past.

In his second grade year of school, Mitchell began to cry every Sunday evening because he knew he had to go to school the next day. At this point, he *hated* school. He was anxious about school, which was the opposite of his attitude toward anything else, and he started to get sick a lot. We found ourselves in the pediatricians office frequently.

And then, just before Thanksgiving, in his second grade year, Mitchell was admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. I'll never forget that day; it will forever be burned into my memory. I was shocked when I heard that he was being admitted. The doctor came out into the hallway to talk to us and said, "This is serious. Your son is sick for a reason. He's obviously stressed about something, and you need to figure out what that is."

We immediately knew what it was. Of course we knew. It was school.

Desperate, I started reading, researching, and looking for different options. *Any* options. I learned that boys in particular learn better when they can move. I learned about No Child Left Behind and how this changed classrooms - something that didn't exist when I was in school or when my husband was in school. I started going into the school to observe, and I came to see Mitchell for who he was - a hands-on learner. He was so out of place in that classroom.

My husband and I went in to talk to the teacher. Her response to us was that she spent 70% of her day just trying to keep her classroom under control, that she was exhausted, and that she couldn't do anymore than what she was already doing.

We went in to talk to the Principal. More than once. Nothing changed. In fact, her entire demeanor and attitude delivered a message that said we were bothering her.

We went in and talked to the Superintendent, also more than once. Still, nothing changed. Mitchell was miserable.

It's worth repeating: Mitchell spent *four days* in the hospital on a breathing machine. As parents, we were scared and frustrated and desperate. I would ask every parent reading this letter to attempt for just a moment to visualize their child laying in a hospital bed on a breathing machine, and now remember you knew it was his school experiences that brought him to that moment. An otherwise happy, healthy child. How would you feel? What would you do?

Understand that Mitchell is smart, creative, and kind. He's always had friends and has never been particularly socially isolated. Mitchell was not enrolled in any special needs programs nor did any teacher or staff member of the school or any doctor ever suggest he needed to be. He never got into trouble. Nothing. I mention this only because our child should have been one of the easier children for the district to serve. Yet, that didn't seem to be happening. He was so unhappy, and he was *only 7*. What 7 year old should hate school? Is that normal? Is that *okay*?

I desperately searched for an alternative. That's when I found the Growing Concern, a small Montessori school in Tannersville, operating for 30+ years now. We enrolled Mitchell there, and he literally went from hating school to loving it. And this happened OVERNIGHT. It was astonishing, and the relief was overwhelming. Over the next couple of years, we continued to enjoy his new school environment, and we watched a friend of his move there as well with similar results. Although they don't have to, The Growing Concern does participate in testing - but they never teach to the test. Yet, in 4th grade our son scored in the 97th percentile for science. He wasn't just doing better. He wasn't just happy. He was thriving academically, too.

Our next challenge was that the Growing Concern only goes through the 5th grade, and when 5th grade came around, Mitchell was clearly still that curious, hands-on learner. We knew the traditional setting would squash all of that all over again. And he knew it, too. He had no desire to return to Stroudsburg or any other traditional educational setting.

That was the beginning of what is now Summit School. Because my kids are my most important work in this life, because I watched my son on a breathing machine for four days and inhalers for weeks afterward - all due to his school environment - I have put my career on hold and have devoted the last 6 years of my life to creating a better school opportunity for him. Six years ago, I spoke with a friend about my desire to find something different, something better for the learner who walked and talked inside of our son. That friend talked to another friend, who talked to another friend, and so on, and a few weeks later, ten people sat together on the couches in my

basement and began to plan. Before we knew it, we were a well-rounded group of educators and administrators (both at the K-12 and college levels), as well as professionals with varying backgrounds from business to finance to Doctors. The following year, with the help of my talented, intelligent, and dedicated co-founders, Summit School of the Poconos was born from that effort. Our school opened as a private school, licensed through the Pennsylvania Department of Education in 2016.

Summit School's founders and board members have put blood, sweat, tears, and a lot of our own money into this venture for six years now. Many, many other parents shared and continue to share varying but similar stories about their struggles and their child's struggles. One thing we quickly understood was that this was so much bigger than us and our kids. So many people were, and still are, depending on us. Parents regularly tell us that they don't know what they'd do without us, that they considered moving out of the area and the only reason they stayed was because of us. We've watched student after student who came from traditional environments that were unsuited to their learning needs come to Summit School and thrive. We started this small school because we wanted something better for our children, but we ended up with something much bigger than that - we ended up with something that has literally and profoundly changed the lives of many young people along with their parents.

Mitchell is now 16 years old and in 11th grade. Our daughter is 13 and in 8th grade. She's only ever attended private school - first at the Growing Concern and then at Summit School. My husband and I often say that if she was our only child, or even if we had two like her, we likely would have gone through 13 years of school without a second thought - much like the two of us did. Maybe we would be the ones today asking *why*. But this is our reality.

Starting and helping to grow a school was never on my bucket list of things to do. I did not take on this role because I wanted to. I took on this role because I felt I *had* to, and I still feel that way today. I'm not an educator; my background is in finance. But I've learned more about education than I ever cared to know. I've had the privilege of working beside some brilliant educators in the making of our school, and I'm fortunate that I had the ability to put my career on hold in order to pursue this labor of love. Not everyone can do that.

When Summit School first opened, the school served students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. The school's goal was to add a grade each year until kindergarten through twelfth grades were served. Ninth grade was added in year two, and tenth grade was added in year three. At the end of year three, the Board decided to pursue a charter, but it was clear that the school did not have the resources to pursue both a charter and private licensure for the addition of eleventh

grade. This meant that if the school did not receive its approved charter for the 2020-21 school year, our tenth grade students would need to move on from Summit School for eleventh grade and beyond. Our parents understood this upfront and still continued to support us. But perhaps no one understood that more than me, as Mitchell was one of those tenth grade students last year.

Here we are a year later, and Summit obviously hasn't received its charter yet. Mitchell has moved on to another school and is doing well, and I credit much of his success today to what he learned at Summit School - not only in academic content, but in his ability to understand how to *learn* and how to *think* critically.

Still, the seed of this school was initially born from the struggles of one child, and that child can no longer attend. The irony is not lost on any of us. As I mentioned before, we don't particularly need Summit School for our daughter, although I do value the education they can provide to her above any other choice available to us in the County.

Even though my personal need is no longer as pressing, even though I'd rather focus more of my time on my profession, I remain steadfast in my role of support for this school. I continue to devote countless hours each and every day to ensure that every student like Mitchell who needs our school has access to it.

When I read many of these same thoughts written here out loud at our charter school hearing last year, I saw the eye rolls that came from some of the PMSD board members and the superintendent as I spoke. I saw the board members and school administration who blatantly and visibly decided not to listen, either intentionally tuning me out by distracting themselves with something else or by whispering to one another. The behavior from this school board and superintendent throughout this application process is shameful. At the end of the hearing, after hours of asking the Summit School team questions, District employees read hundreds of pages of their feedback to us out loud in front of a public audience. The tone of voice used was one akin to an adult scolding a child. Their conclusions were clearly formed before questions were even asked, which makes me question why they wasted everyone's time. Further, Summit School representatives were not provided a public platform in which to respond to any of the accusations made by the district - many of which were false, unfounded, or a direct misrepresentation of the law. This was nothing more than an underhanded attempt to wrongfully discredit Summit School to a public audience. And, as you can see from other information included with this application, it didn't end there.

We all understand that charter schools are not popular with traditional public schools. We all understand there is a desire to hang onto dollars and a fear of a mistreatment of the system. Summit has been clear about that since submitting this application, and has again and again approached the district with a desire to work together in order to provide the best possible education options to the children in our community, regardless of the setting they need in order to thrive.

In return, the district has been condescending, misleading, and spiteful. To see this behavior from the leaders of the largest school district in our County, including educators that are charged with holding the well-being of students and the success of student learning above all else - is disheartening to say the least.

Nevertheless, I cannot control what the PMSD does. I also cannot ignore the fact that this need is real. I cannot claim ignorance. My husband and I can afford to send our kids to private school, but I cannot ignore that there are other children and families in need of this option who cannot afford it. This is particularly true in Monroe County.

I don't believe that anyone can truly understand the importance of this option - the desperation for it - until and unless you have a child who doesn't succeed in the traditional system. But trust me, when you're put into that reality with *your* child, your whole world turns on its side.

We should not be willing to let those who do not conform to the "norm" suffer because of arguments over dollars or power or pride. Or ignorance for that matter. These are our children, and all of them deserve the best we can offer. That will not look the same for everyone. I am not the only parent with a story to tell.

This is the reason we need school choice. *This* is why a smaller, hands on setting with movement is different from the traditional setting of straight rows of desks, a teacher lecturing to quiet, still children from the front of the classroom. *This* is why sometimes less is more for some. (And let's be honest - we all know this is largely what traditional education looks like. If we really want honesty, we should discuss the need for education reform, but we can save that for another time.)

And still, there is so much more to Summit School, though.

In addition to the project-based STEAM approach to curriculum, Summit is a school of shared governance through democracy and civics and restorative practices. Maybe you know what that means, maybe you don't. The founders and staff are happy to elaborate. EVERY SINGLE thing

at Summit School starts with the democratic piece. It is the foundation for all else. I've examined education enough to know that there are no public schools in our area doing this. Kids don't vote on rules. They don't have much of a voice period. Rather, schools are managed largely with crowd control in mind, which is in direct conflict with the environment found at Summit School.

Summit School is not just different. It's academically solid. Every student who has left our school has gone on to thrive in other schools. Most have said they now find school easy and that they're bored. What truth does that speak? I don't have the data to back this up, as Summit hasn't been around long enough nor has the School attempted as a private school to track such data - yet. But a review of our curriculum and our parent and student testimonials should speak for themselves.

Lastly, keep in mind that there are parents who have not had a bad experience elsewhere but prefer a different setting. Maybe it's more movement, maybe it's the democratic or growth-mindset focus, but they're seeking Summit because it's different and because it best fits *their* child's learning needs.

If parents did not desire options, charter schools would not exist. More than a million children would not be on charter school wait lists across the country, and Summit Charter School would not have collected more than 315 pre-enrollment applications in less than three-weeks following the announcement of their charter school application. This number has grown exponentially since.

I am thankful to those parents, our current parents, staff, and our board for their support. And I am thankful to everyone who took the time to sincerely read and digest the information in this letter.

Thus far, the PMSD has largely tried to discredit Summit's application unjustly, pointing to issues or citing missing information that isn't required by Pennsylvania Charter School Law, and at times directly contradicting that law. They clearly have a hard time understanding how Summit delivers education and how it differs from the way they deliver education. Whether that's an honest misinterpretation or willful ignorance on their part is something that only they know, but if it is the latter, I do hope their behavior weighs heavy on their conscience, especially as educators charged with perhaps one of life's most important vocations in life.

To show good faith, Summit decided to reconstruct, tighten, and strengthen the presentation of our charter application, which has become this new submission. We hope this will help the

district understand more about Summit and rest assured that the members of Summit will not let them or our shared community down. If that scenario fails, then the members of the Charter Appeals Board will become the audience of this letter.

The founders and staff of Summit School are hopeful that collaborative relationships can be formed. We're hopeful that more students are better served as a result of our successful charter licensure.

We lead this initiative and invest the hard work and precious time, not because of money and not because of pride. Some of us, like myself, are no longer even doing this for their own children, We do it for the voices that cannot be heard. For the children and parents who need us and cannot lead the fight themselves, be it because of finances or other matters. Whether it takes another year or two years or five, we will not rest until the first group of students enter the doors of Summit Charter School where we know they will go on to thrive and learn so many wonderful things.

To the parents, our community at large, the PMSD, and to the PA Department of Education, we will not let you down. Unless of course, your version of success would be for us to give up or mess up. We won't do that either.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Olson', written in a cursive style.

Jennifer Olson

Summit School Founder and Board President