

**FACTS-2 Charter School  
SRC Testimony, 12/7/2015**

I am Pheng Lim, the principal of the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School.

I grew up as a refugee child. Being told, “Go back to your country,” having other children stare at your food in disgust – knowing that your mother packed it with love and care – and being too embarrassed to eat. Throwing it away made me feel so guilty. Or having a teacher attempt to change my name to Penny because it was easier to pronounce than Pheng, not knowing my parents named me Pheng, which means peace, because it was something they were in search of after surviving a genocide . . . I guess it does something to you . . . I was once told by a teacher my mother needed to provide me with some sharpened pencils. It wasn’t what she said but how she said it – with such a judgmental tone. Although I was only in the second grade, I knew exactly what she was implying. She assumed my mother didn’t take good care of me because I didn’t have a good pencil. What she didn’t know was both my parents worked till 3 in the morning. Every night I would listen for the jangling of their keys and pray that they would return home safely. In school, I was placed in remedial classes. I felt a great disconnect with the school. By sixteen, I wanted to drop out and was in a co-op work program my senior year.

After working a few years, I entered community college. I knew I wanted to work with people who went through the same sort of struggles as me – not fitting in, not feeling smart enough. I did some volunteer work at a childcare center and tutored adults in English my freshman year of college. That was my turning point. I entered into an education program at Temple. I guess I’m sharing all this because, as you all know, education is powerful.

What is happening at FACTS is deliberate and is meeting a particular need. Going through anti-bias trainings, learning about folk arts education, and working and learning from my colleagues at FACTS has been transformative for me in my professional life and personal life. I’m not sure if it is with age that I feel more comfortable with who I am, but I’m sure a major contributing factor is my experience at FACTS.

The students at FACTS are encouraged to keep their names given by their families and are told to correct the adults in the building if we mispronounce it. I see students grinning from ear to ear, proudly eating their foods packed by their families from home. Students bringing all of who they are to a place that considers them and their families as cultural treasures. I see students feeling more comfortable in their own skin. I see parents being active participants in their children’s education, and I have sat at kitchen tables at the homes of our students and families with my colleagues asking, “What are your hopes and dreams for your child?”

The culture and fabric of this school was built upon years of struggle. It was built with so much intentionality. FACTS has deeply impacted the lives of so many families and communities, not just in the present but profoundly in the future. That is what good education does for a family, community, and a city.

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I am Ellen Somekawa, the Executive Director of FACTS.

FACTS is applying for a second charter because we feel we must. FACTS is fully committed to the public school system. We see charter schools as part of the public system and not a replacement for it. But we do believe that charter schools can fill important needs. FACTS was founded by community organizations, deeply committed to public education, who struggled for years to remedy the lack of services for Asian immigrant children. We started FACTS to respond to the educational needs of English Language Learners, and of Asian and immigrant and refugee communities more broadly.

FACTS emerged out of unmet community needs. But as the idea of FACTS became a reality, it became a place to dream about what schools could be. We chose to focus on Folk Arts because we wanted to build bridges within immigrant and refugee families who find dissonance between the experiences of the elder members and those of their children growing up in America. FACTS recognizes the skills and honors the talents that parents, artists, and community members can contribute to children's education.

In a society that is so often fractured along lines of race, ethnicity and language, we also wanted to build bridges between immigrant and non-immigrant communities. Learning folk arts helps build respect for different cultural traditions. And because folk arts carry within them deep values of community, responsibility, patience, and persistence – folk arts contribute to the character development of children in culturally relevant ways.

But now, 11 years in, we are struggling to hold on to our identity and our mission. From 2005 to the present, FACTS' percentage of ESOL students has fallen from a high of 35% to a current level of 10%. In our current Kindergarten class, only 6% of the students qualify for ESOL services. As FACTS becomes more widely known as a high performing charter school, we are less able to insure there are spaces for the English Language Learner students for whom the school was designed.

FACTS seeks a charter for a new K-8 school serving 847 students that will replicate FACTS. The FACTS-2 Charter School will use the same academic and social curricula, school practices, and folk arts focus and pedagogy that led to our success. The new charter will clearly articulate the mission of serving at risk ESOL students in a mixed environment of native English speakers and English Language Learners. We will incorporate our 478 current students into the FACTS-2 Charter Agreement. So in total, we are asking for only 367 new slots.

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FACTS' new charter will provide increased opportunities for enrollment of ELL and non-ELL students through adding an additional classroom for each grade. Pennsylvania Charter School law allows for admissions preferences for At-Risk populations, including English Language Learners. FACTS-2's new charter will maintain a mix of ELL and non-ELL students by setting aside a percentage of spaces for new students who are English Language Learners, and by creating a sheltered ESOL program for recent immigrants and refugees in grades 6-8 who have intensive needs for high quality ESOL services.

FACTS addresses the legislative intent of Charter School Law by serving as a model of innovation. FACTS was one of two charter schools invited by the US Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement and Office of English Language Acquisition to present at a 2014 convening on enhancing access to high quality ESOL services in charter schools. FACTS' ESOL program is also highlighted in case studies and publications by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and the National Charter School Resource Center, among others.

FACTS-2 addresses the District's priorities for innovation and for serving At-Risk students.

- FACTS-2 addresses the needs of At-Risk students who are currently under-served in the array of charter school options in Philadelphia. Among Philadelphia charter schools serving students in grades between K and 8, thirty out of the 46 who provided data had ELL enrollments of 2% or less.<sup>1</sup> Students in need of ESOL services have fewer school choices than non-ESOL students.

FACTS-2 addresses the District's priority for High Quality Replications:

- FACTS was ranked the No. 1 school in Philadelphia according to the District's most recent School Progress Report and had the PDE's top SPP rating among Philadelphia schools.
- FACTS-2 is a replication. The Newcomer Program will be a new program. However in the past FACTS current principal designed and ran FACTS' sheltered ESOL program for newcomers.
- FACTS-2 will have a proven leadership team. FACTS' Principal, Executive Director, Administrative Team and Board will be the leadership team of FACTS-2.

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<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education