



Education Committee Public Hearing
Wednesday, March 14, 2018
Testimony of Jill Johnson
Executive Director and Principal, Explorations Charter School
Winsted, CT

Chairperson Fleischmann, Chairperson Slossberg, Chairperson Boucher, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Jill Johnson, and I am the Executive Director and Principal of Explorations Charter School - a public charter high school in Winsted. Thank you for the opportunity to submit my written testimony today.

On behalf of the Explorations Charter School community, I am writing to express our strong opposition to House Bill 5451: *An Act Concerning Funding for Regional Agricultural Science and Technology Education Centers*. This bill aims to strip away \$4.7 million in critical funding needed for charter schools like Explorations. If passed, this would leave our state's charter schools -- which serve more than 10,000 public school kids -- dangerously short of meeting seat needs for FY 2019. While difficult decisions must be made in an effort to best serve all kids, this simply cannot be the way to do it.

Our mission at Explorations is to provide an environment that cultivates a positive attitude toward lifelong learning in an experiential, non-traditional education setting. The majority of kids come to Explorations because traditional district schools simply were not working for them or meeting their needs. We do everything we can to help our students grow into adults who will be good citizens, good role models and giving individuals who will make positive contributions to society. We've had students share with us that they would have dropped out of school had they not come to Explorations. I've had parents tell me that this school changed the trajectory of their child's life. We are a special school that is fulfilling a unique need for the future leaders of our state.

This need is not limited just to Winsted where our school is located. At Explorations, we welcome students from more than 15 surrounding towns throughout the greater Torrington area and beyond. Transportation alone puts a \$40,000 burden on our school's already stressed budget. But it is our mission to serve as many kids as we possibly can.

Fair and adequate funding is the only way schools like ours can achieve this mission. So when our state approved a bipartisan budget last year, and that budget included the baseline funding our school needed in order to serve our families, it was a bit of a relief. It was reassuring to be able to commit to our families that while it wasn't ideal to again be flat-funded at \$11,000, our line item wasn't cut and we would be receiving a \$250 per-pupil increase for FY 2019, which would help us better serve our kids. But if HB 5451 is passed, we'll be forced to go back on that commitment to our families.

If passed, this bill would only hurt kids and families whom the state is obligated to serve and to protect. It would hurt real families simply because they chose to send their child to a charter school. HB 5451 would cut more than 400 seats from the bipartisan approved budgeted amount of seats needed for school growth over FY19, leaving less seats than are needed even for the current 2017-18 enrollment, and leaving a number of schools without the funding needed to educate a child in the next grade in 2018-2019. That equates to real kids in real classrooms right now.

All families should have choice when it comes to the education of their child, and we recognize that vo-ag schools are an important choice that families should be able to make. But so are public charter schools. Whether they attend a charter, a vo-ag or a traditional district school, all of these children are our collective responsibility, and it is wrong to hurt some in order to help others.

I understand the need to make increasingly more difficult decisions in order to meet the needs of kids across our state. But this funding is critically and urgently needed to educate kids and support families like those at Explorations. The families that have chosen our school deserve the assurance that their choice will be adequately and fairly funded.

This proposed legislation only further highlights how desperately our state needs a unified, single and fair education funding formula for all public school students, inclusive of public schools of choice like charters. While a funding formula was passed last year and is slated to go into effect for FY 2019, schools of choice like public charter schools are not a part of this formula. Even worse, this formula still leaves the state with *more than ten* different school funding formulas that have little or no relation to student learning needs, resulting in a wide variance in funding across similar school districts and types of schools. We must do better.

The state's core responsibility to educate our state's children must extend to all children, regardless of the type of public school they attend. On behalf of the Explorations Charter School community, I respectfully ask that you not support HB 5451.

Respectfully submitted,

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