

**Education Committee Public Hearing**  
**Wednesday, March 14, 2018**  
**Testimony of Dacia Toll**  
**President, Achievement First Public Charter Schools**  
**New Haven, CT**

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Chairperson Fleischmann, Chairperson Slossberg, Chairperson Boucher, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Dacia Toll, and I am co-CEO and President of Achievement First Public Charter Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to submit my written testimony today.

On behalf of Achievement First, which serves nearly four thousand students throughout Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven, I am writing to state that we are in 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 critically-needed funding for charter schools, which serve some of our state's most historically underserved communities. If passed, HB 5451 would leave charter schools, which serve more than 10,000 public school kids, well short of meeting seat needs for students we already serve in FY 2019.

Fair and adequate funding is the only way our state's public charter schools can achieve our mission of providing educational excellence to our state's most vulnerable communities. At Achievement First, we take this mission seriously. We work hard to ensure that all students realize their potential and develop the skills they need to graduate from college, succeed in a competitive world and serve as the next generation of leaders in our communities. Since opening our first school in 1999, Achievement First has maintained the belief that gaps in academic performance that fall along racial and socioeconomic lines are a direct result of the gaps that also exist in access and opportunity. And we know that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, deserve the great education they need to succeed. That's exactly what we aim to provide.

We are proud of the fact that 100 percent of our high school graduates have been accepted to colleges and universities, and that our schools have been named Schools of Distinction by the state. And last year, AF Amistad High was named the number one public high school in the state of Connecticut by U.S. News & World Report. Simply put, our schools are working. Thousands of families have chosen them and we have long waitlists of families hoping to get a seat. And we want to be able to continue to serve students and families as best as we possibly can.

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 we were again flat-funded at \$11,000, at the very



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least our line item wasn't cut and we would be receiving a \$250 per-pupil increase for FY 2019, which is the minimum increase we need to survive after four years of flat funding.

But if HB 5451 is passed, this will have been a false hope. This bill would further hurt kids and families who are already coming to our schools from communities that are facing a number of challenges. It would hurt real families simply because they chose to send their child to a charter school in hopes of giving them a better shot at success. HB 5451 would cut more than 400 seats from the bipartisan approved budgeted amount of seats needed for school growth over FY19. This would leave our schools with less seats than are needed even for the current 2017-18 enrollment, and would leave a number of schools without the funding needed to educate a child in the next grade in 2018-2019. That's incredible damage done to real kids in real classrooms right now.

All families deserve to be able to choose the type of education that works best for their child, and we recognize that vo-ag schools are a great choice that families should be able to make. But so are public charter schools. We understand that difficult decisions must be made, but this \$4.7 million in funding is urgently needed for the families we serve.

Furthermore, HB 5451 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 are not a part of this formula. This formula still leaves the state with *more than ten* different school funding formulas with little to 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 public charter school students, I urge you not to support HB 5451.

Respectfully submitted,

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