



NORTHEAST

CHARTER SCHOOLS NETWORK

Testimony of Jeremiah Grace
Connecticut State Director, Northeast Charter Schools Network
Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee
March 3, 2015

Chairwoman Bye, Chairwoman Walker, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak before you today. My name is Jeremiah Grace, and I'm the Connecticut State Director for the Northeast Charter Schools Network, the membership association for the 22 public charter schools in our state.

I'm here on behalf of those charters, their teachers, students, and parents. As a part of the public school community, we greatly appreciate the support you've given public education in recent years.¹

We understand that right now, investments in our schools aren't easy to come by. The sheer number of cuts you need to make to balance the budget is overwhelming, and we sincerely thank you for taking up the task.

With that said, there are a number of misconceptions about what public charter schools receive and don't receive in this budget. The fact is, all public schools are flat funded in this budget – that includes charters.

Charters do not receive any per-pupil increase to their funding, rather most of the money allocated to charters is for schools that are adding grades according to their charter and need funding to ensure their students can attend class in the fall. The rest is allocated for IOU's the State Department of Education promised to our children when they approved schools in Bridgeport and Stamford last spring.

The grade growth includes schools like Highville Charter School in Hamden, which educates a student population that's 94% Black and 72% low-income, offers a globally-focused education, and also gets a majority of its students to grade-level in mathematics and reading.²

That school is supposed to grow to 12th grade next year, and thankfully the proposed budget funds that growth.

We're also happy to see the proposed budget fund the two approved schools in Stamford and Bridgeport. Both schools are expansions of already successful models – one of which has received a national blue ribbon award. And both schools are led by people of color, something that's far too rare in public education right now.

Their host communities eagerly anticipate those schools – families are already invested and ready to apply. That's nothing new. Two new charter schools opened last year to long waitlists, including over three times as many Bridgeport children – many of whom are English Language Learners – applying for seats at Great Oaks than there are available.

Charter schools are taking on huge challenges and changing lives. Explorations Charter School in Winsted educates a 42% special education population of students from across the region.

Achievement First Hartford Academy serves nearly 100% Black or Hispanic students and gets almost two thirds of them to grade level.³⁴⁵ Considering that Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are on average three grade levels below their peers, that's monumental progress. We can all agree that every Connecticut child deserves the same.

I'm not sharing this to disparage the work of public schools as a whole, but because I'm so excited to share the incredible things charters are doing for children in our state.

Still, charters could do even more if they were treated fairly.

Charter schools didn't receive an increase because their per-pupil grant was flat funded. According to the University of Arkansas, charters in Connecticut receive 16.9% less to spend per-child than their district counterparts.⁶ Charter schools don't levy taxes like local school districts, so the state grant represents the majority of their funding.

Like all public schools, charters exist to educate kids, not fundraise. They shouldn't need to dedicate valuable staff time to make up for a funding gap. And their students don't deserve to be treated as less worthy of public support than their peers.

Nearly everyone agrees that the state's system for funding public education is fundamentally broken. The question is when we will all come together to fix it. We need a system where children are funded based on their individual needs, not based on where they live or what kind of public school they attend. We stand ready to partner with anyone who is serious about a total overhaul here, as many other states have already done.

A great education is a right, not a privilege, and funding inequity stands squarely in the face of that. We must fund all students fairly.

Again, we understand that we're in the midst of a major budget deficit. We understand that you need to make really tough choices this year.

We're asking that you follow through on commitments the state has already made to families and their children, and that you take a hard look at how charter students are funded compared to their peers.

In tough times, public education is the best investment we can make in our future. Please fund charter students fairly, and recognize how important access to options is for families and communities across the state. Thank you.

¹ Connecticut state law defines a charter school as “a public, nonsectarian school.” (CT General Statutes, §10-66aa)

² Data via the State Department of Education. Highville serves students from New Haven (43% black, 66% low-income), and Hamden (29% black, 41% low-income).

³ Data via the State Department of Education.

⁴ Connecticut State Department of Education. “Connecticut Mastery Tests.” 2013. Hyperlink: <http://solutions1.emetric.net/CMTPublic/Index.aspx>.

⁵ Connecticut State Department of Education. “Connecticut Academic Performance Test.” 2013. Hyperlink: <http://solutions1.emetric.net/CAPTPublic/Index.aspx>.

⁶ University of Arkansas. “Charter School Funding: Inequity Expands.” April 2014. Hyperlink: <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/charter-funding-inequity-expands-ct.pdf>