



NORTHEAST

CHARTER SCHOOLS NETWORK

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Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee – S.B. 1096 and S.B. 1099
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Chairwoman Fleischmann, Chairwoman Slossberg, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. My name is Jeremiah Grace, and I'm Connecticut State Director for the Northeast Charter Schools Network, the membership association for the 22 public charter schools in our state.

I'm here, along with many charter leaders, teachers, and parents, to say that **Senate Bill 1096** is a step backward for public education in Connecticut. It hurts children and families that can't wait for access to a great school.

Specifically, the proposed two-year moratorium on new charter schools is a drastic misstep that sends the wrong message to parents, students, and communities across the state.

There is no reason to halt access to new charters, especially when they're following through on the promise of a great education – providing children with a pathway out of poverty. Claims that we're unclear on the efficacy of charters are not based in reality.

The State Department of Education already collects so much data on public schools, including charters, and makes that information available to both legislators and the public at large.

That data results in a number of reports, like, for example, the 'Biennial Report on the Operation of Charter Schools in Connecticut', the most recent of which (2014) says:

"[Connecticut's public charter schools] have demonstrated an ability to work towards closing the achievement gap for student bodies that are made up predominately of students of color and from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The number of charter school seats is growing but not yet keeping up with demand."¹

The state's overwhelmingly positive assessment of charters aside, that data isn't all our state has. Every charter school in our state is already subject to FOIA, so charters are constantly being

evaluated with not only information collected annually, but also with the additional information requested of them.

Hitting pause on new charter schools sends the wrong message to Connecticut families. It tells parents that the State of Connecticut isn't prioritizing their child's education. It tells parents that the state won't take the time to listen, so they shouldn't bother coming together to identify and attract a proven school model for their community. It tells parents that the status quo is good enough, and though the state can work to save the next generation, kids in school right now don't deserve anything better.

I know those parents, and I know those children. So do you. We both know they deserve better.

A charter moratorium doesn't just deny new opportunities; it kills them before they're even a dream. This will not improve education, or help close the achievement gap. Rather, it will hurt kids who need access to school that works for them, now.

I'd also like to speak out against the removal of a timeline for approved charters. There's no reason to change the duration of a granted charter, nor is it prudent to remove the option of a planning year for new schools.

Schools are often approved late in the year, and a planning year is the only way they can open and serve students well. It's a critical part of the charter approval process that must stay in law.

These issues aside, Senate Bill 1096 does do a good job of codifying accountability measures for public charter schools.

Charters are no strangers to accountability. In fact, we're the most accountable public schools out there, because we're regularly reviewed and subject to closure for poor performance.

We strongly support the accountability measures in the governor's bill: charter accountability contracts, school performance frameworks, and greater focus on delivering academic results for children--the most important part of the mission for any school.

Similarly, this bill requires background checks for school staff and boards. Backgrounds are a safety issue that we take extremely seriously. Most of our members have been running them for all staff already, and making sure it's the law is an important step for our children. It is worth noting that requiring charters to wait for these to be completed before hiring someone subjects charters to more stringent rules than district schools for no reason.

I also want to address **Senate Bill 1099**, which establishes a commission tasked with developing a strategic vision and plan for Connecticut's education system.

While we have no problem with the concept, the proposed bill calls for number of representatives from across the public school spectrum, but none of them are from charter schools.

Charter schools are part of the solution. According to our own State Department of Education, they are working to close our state's achievement gap. They deserve a voice on the commission, and a role in any strategic plan for our education system.

Charter schools come in all shapes and sizes, and they give communities a chance to reclaim public education for their children. A moratorium on new charters means parents who know their child's school isn't helping them learn are helpless, unable to take action. And it's a message to current students that their future isn't a priority.

All parents want the same thing – to give their child a better life than they have. As a community, we're calling on you to guarantee that parents have the opportunity to make that happen. Stop this moratorium before it goes any further, and give charter schools a seat at the table on the Planning Commission for Education.

Public charter schools are part of the solution. We deserve to be treated like it.

Thank you.

¹ Connecticut State Department of Education. "Biennial Report on the Operation of Charter Schools in Connecticut." 2014. Hyperlink: http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/equity/charter/report_on_the_operation_of_charter_schools.pdf.