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Testimony before the Connecticut Education Committee
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Introduction

- Good morning Co-Chair Fleischmann, Co-Chair Slossberg, and Other Members of the Committee.
- I'm Robert Reed, the Senior Director of Legal Affairs at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.
- The National Alliance is a national nonprofit organization solely committed to advancing the public charter school movement.
- Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address the Committee as it works on improving Connecticut's charter school law.

How Connecticut's Charter School Law Compares to the National Alliance's Model Charter School Law

- In 2010, we began annually evaluating each state's charter school law against our Model Law.
- In the most recent edition of this effort in January 2015, we ranked Connecticut's charter school law #35 out of 43.
- Not surprisingly, given a ranking so low, we conclude that much improvement is needed in Connecticut's charter school law.

SB 1096

- SB 1096 takes some steps toward improving Connecticut's charter school law, primarily by strengthening the law's accountability requirements.
- However, the bill also includes some problematic provisions – ones that will significantly limit the number of high-quality public school options that are available to the state's families.
- For example, SB 1096 declares that charter management organizations are "public agencies" for Freedom of Information Act purposes.

- This provision is unnecessary and overbroad.
- Existing Connecticut Supreme Court case law and State Department of Education policy already address this question by establishing a “functional equivalency” test to determine whether a charter management organization is subject to the Freedom of Information Act.
- It is also important to note that several non-profit community-based organizations currently serve as charter management organizations in Connecticut.
- This provision could subject their entire operations – even those unrelated to charters – to burdensome Freedom of Information Act requests.
- As a second example of a problematic provision, SB 1096 imposes a two-year moratorium on new charter schools.
- We think it is a mistake to prohibit any new schools from opening over the next two years, especially in light of the solid academic performance of the state’s charters and the 3,600 students on charter school waitlists in Connecticut.
- The state should determine how to best support the creation of more great public school options for the state’s students, not focusing on how to halt the creation of them.
- In addition to examining the important issue of accountability, SB 1096 also should address other, equally important aspects of the state’s charter school law – namely the law’s antiquated provisions dealing with growth, autonomy, and funding.
- First, Connecticut has some of the most restrictive limitations on charter school growth in the country.
- These constraints only serve to curtail the number of new, high-quality public school options that can be created throughout the state.
- As the state strengthens charter school accountability, it should also remove the many limitations on growth that exist.
- Second, instead of providing charters with automatic exemptions from most state and district laws and regulations, Connecticut law allows a charter school application to include, or a charter school to file, requests to waive provisions of the general statutes and regulations that are within the jurisdiction of the state board of education.
- This approach is onerous for groups working to establish charter schools and makes it difficult for public charter schools to obtain the type of flexibility that is needed to develop unique and innovative programs.

- Connecticut should create an automatic waiver in state law that would result in more flexibility for public charter schools and more innovative proposals from charter school founding groups.
- Lastly, Connecticut's current approach to funding public charter school students is unreliable and inequitable.
- Those who are hurt most by this approach are those students desperately waiting for a new high-quality public school option.
- Connecticut should fundamentally change how it funds public charter school students so that all federal, state, and local dollars follow the student from his or her traditional public school to the public charter school.

Conclusion

- In closing, the long-term viability of the charter school movement is directly connected to the quality of the charter schools that are created.
- From our perspective, states have the best chance of creating a high-performing public charter school sector if they take a comprehensive approach to charter school law reform as exemplified in our model law.
- Thank you again for the opportunity to present to you today.
- I'm happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.
- The National Alliance is also happy to serve as a resource to the Committee as it continues its work to improve Connecticut's charter school law.