

Personal Testimony of Kenneth A. Paul to the Education Committee  
February 20, 2007

Good afternoon members of the Education Committee. My name is Ken Paul and I'm the Director of Development for Achievement First, in New Haven. I'm here to speak in favor of Governor Rell's courageous education initiative [Senate Bill 1114] outlined in her budget, specifically, her call to increase funding for public charter schools. Public charter schools in Connecticut are doing an exceptional job, and except for one school whose mission is educating particularly high-needs students, all other schools are outperforming their districts.

As Director of Development, I'm responsible for raising \$3.2 million in operating and capital funds to support our two public charter schools – Amistad Academy and Elm City College Prep. While we are appreciative of this committee's and the entire Connecticut Assembly's long standing support and encouragement of public charter schools, we will be unable to sustain or grow our successful Achievement First model without full funding. Our approximate shortfall per pupil is \$4,000 - \$3,000 of which is an operating deficit and \$1,000 is for building expenses. Responsibly, we cannot continue to contemplate opening high-achieving public charter schools in Hartford, Bridgeport, and Stamford while incurring a \$4,000 per pupil shortfall. The job of our private philanthropists was to be "seed investors" who helped create proof points that high performing urban schools are possible, not to create and sustain a network of underfunded public schools.

Amistad Academy was just named Connecticut's 2006 Title I Distinguished School for achieving the greatest net academic gains of any school statewide. Amistad's sister school, Elm City College Prep, is achieving comparable gains, and we are eager to see what our Elm City elementary students are capable of when they reach middle school in two years.

Amazing to me is that Achievement First's nationally recognized urban education model, along with other high-performing public charter schools are not fully funded. Mayor Bloomberg and NYC Chancellor of Schools, Joel Klein does not differentiate funding for "their" public school children. In fact, our five Brooklyn Achievement First academies receive full pupil funding and free facilities, with services. Because of this full funding, Achievement First has more students in Brooklyn in its second year, than Connecticut has in our eighth year of operation.

We can no longer tolerate the conditions and methods which has earned us the dubious distinction as the state with the worst achievement gap in the country. The Connecticut I'm most proud of has always displayed old-fashion Yankee ingenuity and common sense to find new solutions to perplexing challenges. Connecticut at its best, is a state of social conscious, a bellweather state, and innovator, not an educational laggard that tolerates the social ills of educational and income disparity.

Budgets are representative documents of our collective values and virtues - they state what is most important to us. I can't think of any stronger budget statement by Governor Rell than that ALL Connecticut children should benefit from great schools, no matter where you live or how much your family earns.

I had the privilege of witnessing a distinguished and inspiring panel at the Yale Education Leadership Conference, on Friday, which included Co-Chairman Fleischmann. The large audience left energized and uplifted that superior schools are possible in all our large cities. Thank you Representative Fleischmann for your passion and commitment to improving urban student achievement – many conference attendees commented on your optimistic, hopeful declarations, that change is required and possible. Thank you Senator Gaffey, and members of this committee, for considering the bold and tough decisions which are needed to turnaround our urban school districts.

All significant educational funding increases should come with strong, certain accountability measures. Simply put – perform or perish. Achievement First and other public charter schools are in favor of high student performance goals.

We are eager to have all members of Education Committee visit us and see the extraordinary work of our talented teachers and aspiring students. Come and witness our 130 kindergarten students who are all reading on grade level. Observe our third graders who are often performing well above grade level. See the founding 9th graders of Amistad High School grapple with rigorous courses and display the personal confidence that comes only from achievement. It will be an uplifting, hopeful experience for you.

All children deserve the benefits and opportunities of a first rate education. Race, town residence, or socioeconomic class should not be a determinant of a person's educational opportunity. I'm enthusiastically supportive of Governor Rell's progressive educational budget initiatives and implore the members of the Educational Committee to fully support public charter schools, including full pupil funding.

Thank you.

  
Kenneth A. Paul  
Director of Development  
Achievement First  
441 Erwin Street  
Trumbull, CT 06611