

To: Members of the Education Committee

From: ✓ Ronelle P. Swagerty
Board of Directors, New Beginnings Family Academy
Executive Director, Friends of New Beginnings Family Academy

Date: Wednesday, March 8, 2007

Education

Re: Equitable funding for Connecticut's Charter Schools

Good afternoon members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Ronelle P. Swagerty and I am deeply involved in the charter school community. I have three daughters who attend three of the Achievement First Schools. My oldest, Kimani, has been at Elm City Middle School since its inception. My two younger girls, Jaqueline and Alaysia, are kindergarten students. One attends Elm City Elementary, the other Amistad Elementary.

In addition to being a very satisfied Achievement First parent, I am also the executive director of Friends of New Beginnings Family Academy, the support organization for New Beginnings charter school in Bridgeport, where I serve on the board of directors. I wear a lot of hats in the charter school world and am donning them all as I sit here before you today to appeal for equitable funding for these essential schools of choice.

As a mother, I can tell you that Elm City Middle School was a wonderful choice for my oldest daughter. As an exceptionally bright child, Kimani was unchallenged and often bored in her previous schools. Even the Talented and Gifted Program didn't provide enough advanced study for her. Then we won the lottery and she was accepted into Elm City, where the staff promised to push her academically. Last year, I received a call from Marc Michaelson, Kimani's principal, telling me that they were doing the best they could with Kimani but that she could certainly benefit from more advanced work and they encouraged her to apply to Hopkins, one of the best private day schools in the country. Kimani was indeed accepted, but did not attend strictly for economic reasons. The folks at Elm City Middle responded by creating a special curriculum for Kimani and the other advanced students at the school. It is this kind of commitment to the individual needs of the students that makes Elm City and the other charter schools in Connecticut so invaluable.

Professionally, I run the support organization for and serve on the Board of Directors of New Beginnings Family Academy in Bridgeport, one of the top 10 most improved elementary schools in the state. Last year, New Beginnings Family Academy showed a 21.7 percent increase in the percentage of 4th graders achieving at goal on the Connecticut Mastery Exam versus 2004. This improvement occurred during a year of tremendous change at the school, including new leadership on the Board and within the Administration.

non-speaking
Public Hearing Testimony Speaker:
Ronelle Swagerty

Date: 3/12/07 Bill Number: 1408

The truth is that New Beginnings Family Academy has overcome a number of challenges, not the least of which has been the annual guaranteed gap in our operating budget due to the state's under funding of charter schools. Each year, New Beginnings sets out to provide a quality education to its students – 300 this year -- with just 2/3 of the per pupil funds allotted to the traditional urban districts. Each year, the school's support organization works feverishly behind the eight ball to raise enough money to keep New Beginnings open and to maintain the quality of programs and services that we know contribute to our students' education and future success.

By the way, New Beginnings considers itself one of the lucky ones because, even though we are forced to work with one hand tied behind our backs due to the funding shortage, at least we have a small staff dedicated to helping keep the doors open. Most of our charter school colleagues do not have the benefit of such an arrangement. In those cases, the principals, directors and even classroom teachers are dividing their time between educating the children and trying to raise money to keep their jobs. That's no way to operate a school.

The parents of Connecticut deserve to have choices for their children and their children deserve to have a top-notch public education. I implore you, members of the Education Committee, to support Bill 1408, "An Act Concerning Public Charter Schools" and raise the per pupil funding amount to the statewide average of \$11,500 while demanding more accountability of public charter schools. We will gladly accept them both.

Thank you.