

Testimony before the Education Committee
March 10, 2008
Dacia Toll, President of Achievement First

Good afternoon, Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Dacia Toll, and I was the founding Director of Amistad Academy, a public charter school in New Haven. I am now the president of Achievement First, a non-profit organization which currently operates 7 public charter schools in New Haven, Bridgeport, and Brooklyn, NY. More than 9 years ago, the Amistad founders set out to prove that students from the city of New Haven could perform as well as their peers across the state if we matched high expectations with high levels of support, more time, great instruction, a supportive, achievement-oriented environment, and lots of hard work on the part of students, parents, and staff. Thanks to the charter school structure, we were able to step outside of the traditional system, exercise more autonomy and innovate – all in exchange for increased accountability for our students' results. We are very grateful for the support of members of this Committee and very proud of the results achieved by students and educators at our Achievement First schools. Let me share quickly several highlights:

- At our two New Haven middle schools – where 98% of the students are African American and Latino, 71% are from low income families, and all selected by a blind lottery – our students have achievement results that are more than double the performance of their city peers, and, in the later grades, best state averages. On the 2007 CMT, Elm City's 7th graders – who had arrived at Elm City 3 years before testing 2 years below grade level – had soared and achieved 85% proficiency in reading, 92% proficiency in math, and 98% proficiency in writing. They have proven that Connecticut's vexing achievement gap can, in fact, be closed.
- Based on the 2007 CMTs, Amistad Middle has the highest performing group of Hispanic students anywhere in the state. Elm City Middle has the highest performing group of African-American students anywhere in the state.
- And our new middle school in Bridgeport, which opened this fall, is already posting interim assessment results that outperform both Amistad and Elm City.
- At our elementary schools, 96% of our kindergarteners were reading by Christmas, and, at our high schools, 100% of students are now enrolled in AP U.S. History and A.P. Biology.

In terms of the legislation before the committee today, there are 3 main points that I would like to address:

First, we are in need of funding for 40 additional seats for Elm City's ninth grade. We currently have a request pending before the State Department of Education to expand Elm City's successful program to include a 9th grade. Based on Elm City's strong track record, we are very hopeful that the request to be approved, as it was a year ago for Amistad Academy. Unfortunately, due to the timing of the state department's expected decision in June, we worry that the expansion will be approved – but there will be no funding to provide the extra seats. We realize now that we should have put in a request

for this expansion nearly a year ago, but the process was not clearly defined. It is incredibly important to us that Elm City's hard-working scholars are able to continue on their path to college, and we are hoping that the Committee will work with us and SDE to figure out a creative way to fund these seats if the expansion is approved.

Second, I would like to speak against the requirements in An Act Concerning Charter School Governance. I am not sure what problem the requirements are trying to solve, and I worry that they might create more harm than good. The act would forbid one person from serving on more than one charter school Board. In our case, we intentionally build our charter school boards with overlapping membership in order to facilitate the sharing of best practices. We do not want to create charter schools that are islands of excellence but rather to build a powerful network of schools where board members can evaluate multiple schools and tease out helpful points of comparison. Within the traditional system, school board members are responsible for 20 or even 50 schools, and there is no prohibition against their service on other boards. As we seek to replicate our success in Bridgeport and Hartford, such a prohibition would compromise our efforts to have our new schools benefit from the expertise developed at the original schools.

Finally, I would like to speak to the issue of funding. We are very grateful for the recent increases in charter school funding. However, we would like to encourage the committee to resolve this issue definitively and tie charter school funding to the state average so that adjustments are made automatically that are commensurate with other public schools across the state. Under the current budget proposal, we are to receive \$9,300 per student, which is still more than \$2,000 less than the state-wide regular education average. Achievement First already serves more students in New York after 3 years than we do in Connecticut after 9 years simply because the funding environment is far more favorable in our neighboring state. In New York and in Massachusetts and New Jersey the money follows the child in their system of public school choice. Project funding levels for next year for NY charter schools are \$12,432 per student. Even when correcting for a slight cost of living adjustment, we have nearly 25% more funding to operate our NY schools. In Connecticut, we are dependent on private philanthropy in a way that is neither scalable nor sustainable.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony and for your support of Connecticut's children.