

**Testimony before the Appropriations Committee
Dacia Toll, President, Achievement First
February 11, 2009**

Good evening, Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and members of the Appropriations Committee. I understand you have a very challenging task before you. My name is Dacia Toll, and I was the founding principal 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 9 public charter schools in New Haven, Bridgeport, and Hartford, CT and in Brooklyn, NY.

Ten 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, and a supportive, achievement-oriented environment. Thanks to the charter school structure, we were able to step outside of the traditional system, exercise more autonomy and innovate – as long as we were willing to be accountable for the performance of our students.

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 schools. As an example, at our two New Haven middle schools – where 98% of the students are African American and Latino, 72% are from low income families, and all selected by a blind lottery – our students have achievement results that are more than double those of their city peers and best state-wide averages. On the 2008 CMT, our 8th graders – who arrived in 5th grade testing 2 years below grade level – had soared and achieved an average of 70% mastery in reading, writing, and math. As the graph attached shows, they have proven that Connecticut's vexing achievement gap – the largest achievement gap in the country – can, in fact, be closed.

I come before you now with a desperate plea. Just to be clear, the funds we are requesting are not to increase the per pupil funding level of charter schools. As you have heard from others this evening, we started our schools with the expectation that they would be able to grow to accommodate the grades approved in our charter, either K-8 or K-12. Based on the Governor's proposed budget, our families and staff now face real uncertainty about whether we will even be able to provide the next grade. Right now, 500 charter school students don't have seats for next year. For us, this means that:

- Amistad Elementary School will not be able to offer its second graders a continuation to third grade
- Amistad High School will not be able to offer its hard-working 11th graders a senior year – they will be left just short of the goal line after seven years of climbing the mountain to college at Amistad. This is the group that, as 10th graders, posted 100% proficiency on the reading, writing, and science sections of the CAPT test, outperforming both students in Madison and Guilford, CT. After all that hard work, are we really going to leave them one year short of matriculating to college?
- AF Bridgeport, which is only in its second year of operation, will not be able to offer a 7th grade to its current students. This would eliminate more than a third of the student body – a devastating blow to a new school in a community with so much hope and so much need.

- AF Hartford, which opened only last year after Herculean effort, would not be able to offer a 2nd and a 6th grade. This is an especially troubling outcome. When the revised biennial budget was not passed last year, this approved school, with 252 students who were already admitted and excited, was put at risk. In a truly inspiring story, the community rallied behind the school with the city contributing funds and private philanthropists stepping up to give more than \$2 million to ensure that the school would open as planned. These private donations were made based on a commitment that the school would be fully funded starting in FY10 and going forward. Unfortunately, there simply isn't enough money in the budget to take care of these students along with other charter students across the state.

Many of you are familiar with the funding challenge that charter schools face – we only receive 75% of the public funding that goes to the traditional public schools. However, we understand that, given the current fiscal climate, we cannot expect an increase in our funding. Our request this year is simply to avoid the tragedy of half-completed schools. Parents have done their part in making a choice on behalf of their child. Our teachers and principals have worked long hours to create a supportive, challenging learning environment from scratch—one of the hardest tasks there is. And our students have gone above and beyond to make up lost ground and get back on the road to college.

Unless this committee acts, 500 of these students are going to be left without a seat – a “lottery ticket” that promises that they will get the instruction and support they need to close the achievement gap and graduate from college. Sadly, the data tell us that today in our state—and in our country—schools that are truly closing the achievement gap are rare. I can think of no greater tragedy than to limit seats in an urban public school that is closing the achievement gap.

The most obvious costs of this shortfall are for the families served by these schools and the hardworking principals and teachers who have come together build these bridges to college. A broader but no less important loss would be to the momentum these examples of excellence have created in the larger movement in Connecticut to close the achievement gap.

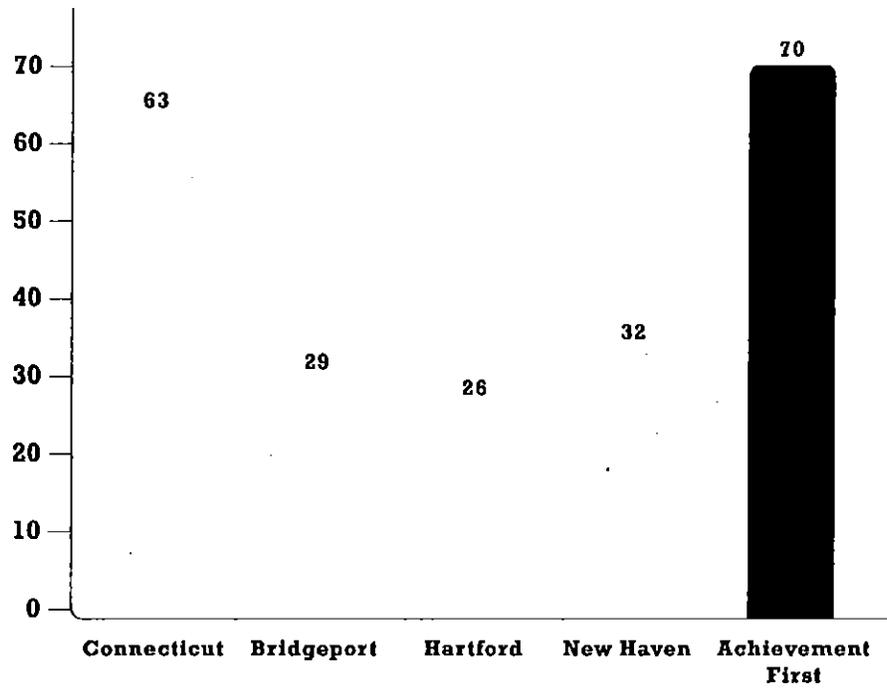
Every year more than 700 principals, teachers, engaged citizens, and public officials visit our schools to take lessons learned back to their communities. In other ways, members of the Achievement First family are engaged in projects to help spread the seeds of innovation around our state. Our new AF Hartford Academy has emerged as a critical partner in Superintendent Adamowski's “all-choice” turnaround plan—a partnership we are looking to extend to other districts in the state. I believe we are on the cusp of a tipping point in our state. After 10 years of hard work, the opportunity to make real progress in turning the tide on Connecticut's achievement gap is finally in reach.

I ask that you help us complete these schools—not only for the families they serve, but for the thousands of other families that will be better served by their example.

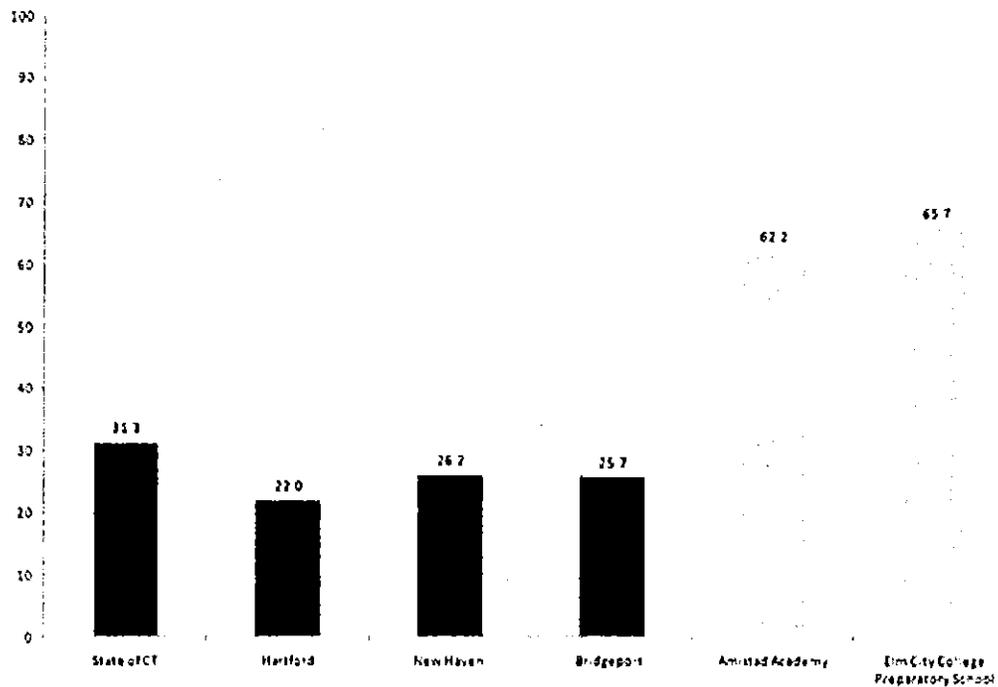
Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony and for your support of Connecticut's children.

Connecticut Mastery Test

Percent of 8th Grade Students At or Above Goal
in Math, Reading and Writing



Percent of Low-Income 8th Graders At/Above Goal, 2008 CMT



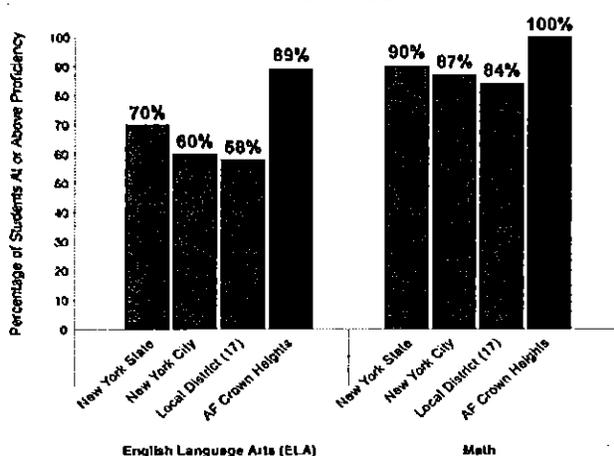


2008 STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND GROWTH SUMMARY

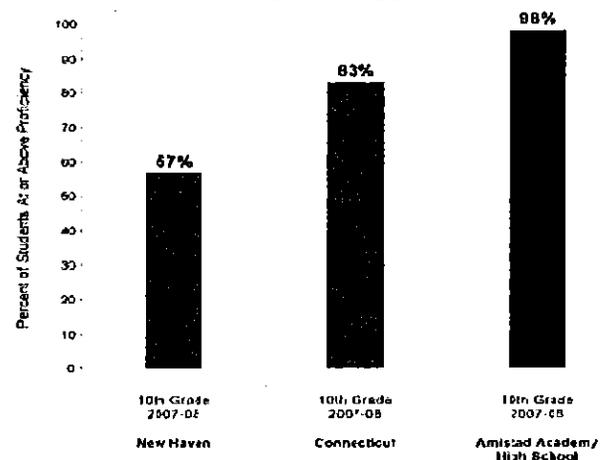
Student Achievement

- Achievement First's New Haven eighth graders, our oldest middle-school students, posted results that were almost double their New Haven peers and bested state-wide averages in all three subjects (reading, writing and math) with 78 percent proficiency in reading, 93 percent proficiency in math and 96 percent proficiency in writing.
- Amistad Academy was recently highlighted by the U.S. Department of Education as one of seven schools in the country that are models for closing the achievement gap.
- Amistad Academy High School showed exceptional results in its first year of testing, with the inaugural 10th-grade students achieving 93 percent proficiency in math and 100 percent proficiency in all three other subjects – reading, writing and science. These results position Amistad High's New Haven students as number one in the region for reading and number two for writing, outperforming students in both Madison and Guilford, CT.
- The Amistad Academy Orchestra and Achievement First Bridgeport Academy Jazz Ensemble participated in concerts in New Haven, Brooklyn, and Bridgeport. We had our first network-wide AF Music Celebration on June 20, 2008 with orchestra, jazz band, dance, or step team performances from almost every school in the network.
- In New York City, our oldest elementary students (third graders) had their first chance to take state tests. Ninety-nine percent of them passed the NYS Math exam, while 84 percent passed the NYS English Language Arts exam.
- Our oldest Brooklyn middle-school students (seventh graders) outperformed their Crown Heights peers by 25 percentage points in reading and 30 percentage points in math.
- Both Achievement First Crown Heights and Achievement First Endeavor received straight "A"s on the recently released NYC DOE Progress Reports (only these two schools had the two years of testing data required to receive Progress Report grades). Achievement First Crown Heights was in the top four percent of all NYC schools, and Achievement First Endeavor was in the top one percent. In fact, Achievement First Endeavor ranked number four among nearly 1,100 K-8 schools in NYC.
- Community involvement was a hallmark of all schools by supporting numerous causes, including food banks, disaster relief in Myanmar, and AIDS research.

NY State Exams: English Language Arts and Math
Achievement First Crown Heights and Comparative Data (Class of 2021)



2008 Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT)
Percent of Students At or Above Proficiency in Reading, Writing, Math, and Science



Growth

- After a long campaign and with a lot of help, Achievement First Hartford Academy opened in August 2008 with 252 scholars, bringing our total Connecticut enrollment to 1,600.
- In just over three years after expanding into NYC, Achievement First now serves 2,100 students at five Brooklyn charter schools. Achievement First was pleased to open Achievement First Brownsville in 2008.