

Testimony before the Government Administration and Elections Committee
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Good Morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. My name is Sherese Ward, and I am the Director of Government & Community Relations for Achievement First. This year, we celebrate ten years of operating a network of high-performing charter schools across Connecticut, now serving 1600 students in Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford. I am proud to say that over this time, we have consistently demonstrated gap-closing results, proving that minority children from high poverty communities can achieve at the same level of their suburban peers.

I come before you today in support of House Joint Resolution No. 114. Some of you may be wondering how and why a resolution like this could impact my work. The essence of it is that Connecticut's charter school funding system relies on annual state budget appropriations, while by contrast our high performing schools take many years to grow out to their full size. As a result, our growth is vulnerable across multiple budget years, and hence the state's the existing state constitution statute requiring an annual balanced budget has challenged our growth and unintentionally undermines the continued operation and success of high-quality public charter schools.

When our charters are granted by the state, they are approved for a K-8 school, though we typically just open with Kindergarten and 5th grade, knowing that we will add a grade each year until we have a full system. This allows our principals and staff to better manage a new school as we build with a smaller family of students, and allows us to establish the desired culture from the outset. You would imagine that funding would be planned for each year, as we bring in new students, but unfortunately, it isn't guaranteed, and results in us having to annually lobby for additional funding. This effort becomes exacerbated in tough economic environments like we're experiencing.

Most illustrative of this challenge is our current fight to retain essential monies necessary for our growth over the next biennium. This year we face a funding shortfall of 500 student seats for the coming year. Unless this gap is closed this would mean that our Hartford students would not have a 2nd and 6th grade, our Bridgeport students would not have a 7th grade, and that our 11th grade Amistad High School students would not have a senior year. In my eyes, none of these are acceptable options, but the current state mandate simply doesn't fit the longer term planning cycle needed to run great high-performing public schools. And at a time when education is one of our most critical investments, not having the guarantee of funding potentially cripples our future economy and vitality.

This problem was also exemplified by the difficulty in opening our Achievement First Hartford Academy last year. Because the charter was approved in between budget cycles, the money for the new seats hadn't been appropriated, and the session ended last June without the approval of a revised budget line item for those additional seats. This created

an untenable situation for all concerned where we had made assurances to 252 admitted students, their families and a community. The staff was hired, a building was in the midst of renovation, but there was no funding to make good on our promise. We were then forced to rely overwhelmingly on private philanthropy, which came forward with the clear understanding that this would be a one time rescue effort and that the school would be fully funded with public dollars moving forward.

I believe having a tool that allows for the state budget to be balanced over a longer economic cycle, would be one promising way to diminish, if not eliminate these burdens. As it is, we remain handicapped by having our fate inextricably tied to a state budget process where if revenue varies from expectations, we face dramatic consequences for our students.

Estimates show that in less than 20 years, 40 per cent of our state's workforce will be African-American and Latino, which further illustrates how important a sustainable investment in urban education truly is. The onus is on us not to let another economic crisis derail our efforts and commitment to provide quality education for all. I fear that we cannot afford to pay *that* price.

Thank you for your time and consideration.