

Danielle K. Smith, CT BAEO, Appropriations Committee Hearing, February 16, 2010

My name is Danielle K. Smith. I am the State Director for the Connecticut Black Alliance for Educational Options (CT BAEO). Nationally, BAEO's mission is to increase access to high-quality educational options for Black children by actively supporting parental choice policies and programs that empower low-income and working-class Black families. In Connecticut, we are focused on supporting district-led reform efforts e.g. in Hartford and New Haven and the expansion and sustainability of high-performing charter schools across the state.

This evening, I am here to express support for Connecticut's high-performing charter schools that are addressing the achievement gap, which we know disproportionately impacts Black and Latino children from low and middle income families. These families typically have limited options within the district-led schools, as a majority of those schools are low-performing, and cannot afford to move to towns where public schools are better. Connecticut has nearly 185 schools that are identified as failing, and the students whose achievement results lag year after year in these schools, are the very children that CT BAEO's advocacy efforts are centered around.

CT BAEO, therefore, cannot be silent on the issue of charter funding, because solving this problem unlocks tremendous opportunity for the sustainability and expansion of great schools that are making the difference for low-income families of color across the state.

We appreciate the state's demonstrated commitment to making charter school funding more equitable and stable in the past. CT BAEO also applauds the recommendation of the State Board of Education to the Governor for an increase in charter school funding in the amount of \$1,000 per pupil—a courageous recommendation in the face of the financial crisis facing our state. But we offer that the state can take bolder action that will have lasting implications for some of Connecticut's most vulnerable student populations and dramatically reform our funding system.

Connecticut can join the other 47 states in union who have already implemented a system in which money follows the child to the school of their choice, rather than funding schools through an annually appropriated line-item.

Connecticut is still the state with largest achievement gap in the nation, but we have an opportunity to completely reverse this reality by embracing an equitable and sustainable funding system for high-performing charter schools as a critical achievement-gap closing reform. Other advocates have stressed the importance of addressing charter funding to make Connecticut more competitive in the Race to the Top application process, and that is certainly a compelling reason to make needed changes right now. But, far more compelling is the truth that fixing our broken educational system—by expanding high quality options for the students and giving parents, the taxpayers whose dollars fuel our schools, real choice—holds the most promise for closing the achievement gap once and for all. And closing this embarrassing gap will make our state competitive in the global economy and result in better outcomes for communities across the state.

Our school funding system, as it exists, is extremely costly to the state, confusing and uncertain for charter school parents and students, and constraining to the growth of the very schools that are closing the achievement gap.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today about the problem of unequal funding for Connecticut's public charter schools and for considering the children and families whose interests are so often lost in conversations about how to best deliver public education.