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Testimony of

John Altieri, Jurisdictional Vice President PreK-12
AFT Connecticut

S.B. 438 An Act Concerning Charter Schools and Open Choice Program
Funding

H.B. 5493 An Act Concerning Strategic Planning in State Education Policy and
Charter School Funding

Education Committee Public Hearing

March 15, 2010

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischman and members of the Education Committee. I am John Altieri, a former Norwalk teacher and current AFT Connecticut Jurisdictional Vice President. I represent teachers who work in grades PreK-12. AFT Connecticut is a diverse labor union with 28,000 members. I am here today to discuss S.B. 438 An Act Concerning Charter Schools and Open Choice Program Funding and H.B. 5493 An Act Concerning Strategic Planning in State Education Policy and Charter School Funding.

We urge you to reject proposals for "*money follows the child funding*" and using a statewide average to determine per pupil funding. The *money follows the child* proposal takes scarce funding from local districts which are already providing resources by statute and by individual M.O.U.s. with charter schools. Using a statewide average for per pupil funding will mean an increase of approximately \$1,000 per pupil in a time when districts are struggling to meet basic needs.

Concerning charter schools raises some perennial issues:

- We continue to oppose the expansion of charter schools beyond the current cap of 24. Additional "site charters" as proposed in section 2(g) are merely a way to skirt current law and create charter chains.
- We also continue to oppose the language set forth in lines 392-403 and 431-439 which proposes to fund charter schools on a state-wide net per pupil



expenditure. We are quite sure this is higher than the current allocation and also higher than the poor communities where the charters are located. If anything, appropriations should be aligned with the communities where the school is located.

Our new concerns are:

- We do not see the need for “alternative charter schools.” A state charter should cover that need by definition.
- Lines 70-85 are curious and seem to be tailored to specific circumstances and for no logical reason.
 - ✓ Why must the State Board of Education approve two new charters limited to less than 100 students?
 - ✓ Why must the State only permit additions of 575 students or more to existing charter schools?

We urge you to look carefully at all of these sections of the bill and change the language.

We are not opposed to charter schools, and we believe there should be equitable funding for all schools. We do, however, oppose increasing the number of charters until there is more analysis of their funding and performance. The same holds true for magnets. We need to fairly fund the schools we already have before adding to alternative schools.

Charter Schools are undoubtedly the “hot topic” in Connecticut education circles today. Opinions range from those who believe they are the greatest new program, to those who think they are the worst scheme yet to destroy public education. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. Some urban charters have demonstrated short term success, some have not; the jury is still out. We also have magnets which have

demonstrated longer term success and regular urban public schools with long term demonstrated success.

I want to urge you today to be cautious when allowing expansion of legislatively approved experimental programs with children. The reporting from charter schools is sparse, short term and lacking in depth and breadth of research which would be considered valid.

We would ask that you not expand the number of charters or change the enrollment caps. The only exception should be for those who have demonstrated short-term success, not just plans for success, and careful monitoring should be in place for the sake of the children.

I believe that your funding formula gives charters higher funding than their host districts. This is simply not right. I remember clearly when charter advocates proclaimed they could do more for less money. The same should be said for special education costs. Since the school district is not fully reimbursed by the State, there is a net loss to the host district.

Make sure you don't give financial advantage to the charters or financial harm to the host school district. We must remember that charter schools are experimental laboratory schools to reduce racial isolation, promote innovative practices and spread the "good word" of those best practices to all of Connecticut's public schools. I know we have several schools in Connecticut that have raised test scores. I applaud those schools. I am not sure we know in an experiential way why those schools have higher test scores. For this reason, we believe the most important part of this legislation is contained in the last three lines of Section 4(3) "*propose a system to identify the successful models and innovations from high-performing public charter programs and to communicate them to other public schools throughout the state.*"

Communicating successful models and innovations to other public schools will help all of Connecticut's children.

It is proven that one of the most effective ways to close the achievement gap is by reducing class size. But Connecticut cities and towns are already experiencing increases in class size due to inadequate funding for public schools on the part of the state and local governments. But with money "following-the-child" like proposals for charter schools, class sizes will increase even more.

Thank you for your time and if you have any questions I would be happy to address them.