

Testimony Re:
Raised Bill No. 5493
An Act Concerning Strategic Planning in State Education Policy
and Charter School Funding

Stephen Tracy
March 15, 2010

Sen. Gaffey, Rep. Fleischmann and Members of the Education Committee:

My name is Stephen Tracy, and I am the Superintendent of Schools in Derby, Connecticut. Today, however, I am speaking simply for myself, as a citizen and a life long advocate for quality public education.

In 1991, I came before this Committee to urge the creation of Connecticut's first charter schools. Subsequently, the General Assembly established a Task Force to study the notion of Charter Schools – and I was privileged to serve as its chair. We delivered our report to the Committee in February of 1992. I have been a proponent of parent choice and charter schools ever since for two reasons.

First, quality. I believe that choice is an impetus to hard work and innovation that can lead to better schools. I've had the opportunity to help create several schools of choice over the years – including the Wintergreen Magnet School here in Connecticut – and I can tell you that when a faculty realizes that their school only exists because it works and because parents see it as a great choice for their children, their willingness to work hard, to try new approaches, and to respect parents as true partners in the educational process goes up dramatically.

Equally as important, I regard school choice is a matter of simple justice. Why shouldn't low income parents enjoy the same right to choose a quality school for their children as folks who can afford an expensive tuition or a nice house in a suburban community? This remains the central civil rights issue of our time.

For these reasons, I urge you to support the changes in charter school financing that are before you today. It is no secret that Connecticut's existing charter law is regarded as among the most timid in the nation -- in large part due to the financial handicaps that it imposes on anyone seeking to create a charter school. The reforms contemplated in Bill No. 5493 strengthen our charter school statute substantially by backing charter school students with the same operating dollars that we provide to students in traditional schools (instead of the current 75 cents on the dollar), and by providing their schools with the same facilities funding that we accorded to traditional public schools.

Despite the unfair nature of our current charter school funding arrangement, Connecticut is home to several high quality charter schools like the Amistad Academy, Elm City College Prep, Achievement First Bridgeport Academy, and Park City Prep where low income children of every color -- including African American and Latino children -- are demonstrating the academic talent that we all know they have. Just think how much more progress Connecticut's children could make if the charter schools that their parents have chosen for them were getting a fair shake when it comes to funding.

Thank you....