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National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

Written Testimony to the Connecticut Legislature's Education Committee

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On behalf of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ("the Alliance"), I am writing to strongly urge the Connecticut Legislature to pass HB 5493. By enacting this bill into law, Connecticut will make significant improvements to its public charter school law in the two critical areas of caps and funding. Not only will these improvements lead to more high-quality public charter schools for the state's students, but they will also provide a considerable boost to Connecticut's competitiveness for the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top (RTTT) grant competition.

The Alliance is the national nonprofit organization committed to advancing the charter school movement. In June 2009, the Alliance released *A New Model Law For Supporting The Growth of High-Quality Public Charter Schools*, a landmark document that reflects what charter supporters have learned about which ingredients in a charter law best support the creation of high-quality charter schools – and which do not. In January 2010, the Alliance released *How State Charter Laws Rank Against the New Model Public Charter School Law*, which analyzed each of the 40 state charter laws against the new model law. In this document, Connecticut's law was ranked as #22 in the country (out of 40), with its primary deficiencies in the areas of caps and funding.

Caps. Connecticut's charter school law contains the following caps: 250 students per state board of education-authorized charter or 25 percent of the enrollment of the district in which the charter is located, whichever is less; 300 students per state board of education-authorized K-8 charter or 25 percent of the enrollment of the district in which the charter is located, whichever is less; and, for charters with a demonstrated record of achievement, 85 students per grade may be added.

These are some of the most restrictive caps on charter growth in the nation. Because of these restrictive caps, in fact, the Alliance named Connecticut one of its laggards in growth and choice policies and recommended that the U.S. Department of Education disqualify Connecticut's RTTT grant in

How State Charter Laws Rank Against the New Model Public Charter School Law.

HB 5493 finally removes these arbitrary caps, thus recognizing that Connecticut's artificial limits on charter expansion do not ensure quality, but do limit access to high-quality public school choices for the students and families who are demanding them.

Funding. HB 5493 addresses the three primary shortcomings of Connecticut's approach to funding public charter schools: unstable funding, inequitable funding, and inadequate facilities support.

Connecticut is one of only three states in the nation that require a separate, annual line item appropriation to fund its charter schools (the other two being Hawaii and Rhode Island). All other states fund charters through their existing systems for supporting traditional public schools, resulting in a much more stable funding system for public charter schools.

Connecticut's state-authorized charter schools are also denied locally generated property tax dollars and thus only receive state dollars. This approach results in state-authorized charter schools receiving 75% of the dollars that flow to traditional public schools in the state. Unfortunately, this inequitable situation is similar to what occurs in other states. A 2005 Thomas B. Fordham Institute study of 16 states and D.C. found that public charter schools receive 78% of the dollars that flow to traditional public schools.

Connecticut currently provides some support for charter facilities, including a small one-time grant program for renewed charter schools and some limited bond financing. While these supports are helpful, they are still too limited given the challenges that face charter schools regarding facilities costs.

Improving funding equity for charter schools in state laws is one of the policy goals essential to the long-term growth, quality, and sustainability of public charter schools. As we found in *How State Charter Laws Rank Against the New Model Public Charter School Law*, no states have licked this one yet. However, some have made more progress than others, including Massachusetts.

HB 5493 wisely creates a more stable and equitable approach to funding Connecticut's charter schools that draws heavily from the approach in Massachusetts, one of the nation's leaders on this front. HB 5493 removes the requirement for a separate, annual line item appropriation, requires that charters are funded through the state's existing funding system for traditional public schools, and significantly increases state support for charter facilities costs. At the same time, HB 5493 recognizes that districts face some limited transition costs as students transfer to public charter schools and creates a three-year transition aid program, modeled on a similar program in Massachusetts.

Race to the Top. The changes to Connecticut's charter law in HB 5493 also align with the following three criteria in the "Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools" section in the RTTT grant application:

- The extent to which the State has a charter school law that does not prohibit or effectively inhibit increasing the number of charter schools in the State (as measured by the percentage of total schools in the State that are allowed to be charter schools) or otherwise restrict student enrollment in charter schools.
- The extent to which the State's charter schools receive equitable funding, compared to traditional public schools, and a commensurate share of local, State, and Federal program and revenue sources.
- The extent to which the State provides charter schools with facilities funding (for leasing facilities, purchasing facilities, or making tenant improvements), assistance with facilities acquisition, access to public facilities, the ability to share in bonds and mill levies, or other supports; and the extent to which the State does not impose any facility-related requirements on charter schools that are stricter than those applied to traditional public schools."

This section is worth 40 points out of the 500 in the RTTT grant application. As the U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has stated on multiple occasions, a small number of points will separate the winners from the losers in the RTTT grant competition.

The Alliance strongly urges the Connecticut Legislature to enact HB 5493 in 2010. By doing so, Connecticut will significantly improve its charter law's current national ranking of #22 and make the state considerably more competitive for a RTTT grant. Most importantly, Connecticut will go a long way toward better supporting the creation of more high-quality public charter schools for the state's students.