

Testimony for Appropriations Hearing 3/1/11 for the Connecticut Charter School Network

Submitted by CCSN Director Jo Lutz

Good evening Chairman Walker, Chairman Harp, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Jo Lutz. I am the Director of the Connecticut Charter School Network. Like most public agencies and service providers across the nation, charter schools have spent the past few months worried about budget cuts. And so we were relieved by the governor's decision to maintain education funding at current levels, despite the hard economic times faced by the state. While we respectfully request that the committee to allocate the proposed funds for charter schools, that is not the focus of my testimony tonight. More important than sparing education providers in the short term is the health of Connecticut's education system in the long term. In other words, we need to overhaul the education funding formula. While most decision-makers agree on this in theory, few seem to think that now is the time. But Now is when Connecticut has the nation's largest achievement gap which leaves more children farther behind with each year that passes. Now is when charter schools are entering their 4th consecutive year with no cost-of-living increase, and some are wondering how much longer they can maintain operations. Now is when Connecticut shoulders the burden of an expensive and inefficient funding system during a budget crisis. And Now is when governor Malloy has appointed a task force to tackle this problem, and has indicated that he expects a clear action plan on a clear time frame. CCSN supports this initiative unequivocally and applauds Governor Malloy's leadership.

However, we hope you will pardon our skepticism about concrete results coming out of yet another commission, committee, or task force to study education funding. We hope you will pardon our shameless grandstanding on a line item, because the bill we would wish to support is not on the table but the conversation has to be. We believe that the difficult work of hashing out policy should start now if there is to be any hope of useful legislation by the 2012 session. This is, as it should be, the explicit goal of this process – not another batch of unheeded recommendations.

To be effective, the task force should include a broader representation of stakeholders, including the charter and magnet communities. No past commission, committee, to study school funding has included a representative from the charter schools, even though they have been central to the debate. Charter schools are held up as both a silver bullet for public education and as a threat to the existence of public education as we know it. Neither of these scenarios is realistic. Yet without the presence of the charters

themselves, policy forums can become echo chambers for such viewpoints. The fact that the Charter School Network has not been at the table to discuss ECS reflects the fact that charter schools are left out of the ECS formula itself. We feel this creates a perverse and unfair incentive not to invest in charter education, despite the fact that charter schools in Connecticut have made incredible academic achievements with minimal financial support.

Thus the Connecticut Charter School Network wishes both to insist on our own behalf, and to recommend for the sake of process, that a direct representative of the charter schools be appointed to this latest and hopefully final commission to study ECS. . We look forward with cautious but sincere optimism to working cooperatively toward this lofty goal. Thank you all for listening.