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Andy Boas Testimony

March 24, 2011

Good afternoon, Senator Harp, Representative Walker, vice chairs and members of the Appropriations Committee; thank you for your consideration of my testimony. I am pleased to speak with you today about SB 1195, An Act Concerning School Finance Reform.

My name is Andrew Boas. I am a resident of Westport, a partner with Carl Marks for thirty years (no, not that Karl Marx), and an attorney in good standing in New York State. I am the founder of the Charter Oak Challenge Foundation, and founder and active board chair of Achievement First Bridgeport Academy's two schools, and serve on the boards of ConnCAN, the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and the Bridgeport Public Education Fund. Most importantly, I am someone who cares deeply about educating our most needy and deserving and stands before you today to demand change, to demand equality for all our children, to demand you pay attention to a broken formula and system for public education in our state and to express outrage for a system that has been broken since forever.

Connecticut has the notorious distinction of being the state with the widest achievement gap in the nation between poor students, on the one hand and their wealthier peers, on the other, many, many, many years running. Schools merely 7 miles from where I live, in Bridgeport, have been failing for decades and we decided we couldn't wait around any longer to change this horrific paradigm. In 2001, I founded Charter Oak Challenge Foundation, along with a number of my closest friends and allies in education reform, because I saw the continuing demise of public school education in my home state. For ten years running, Charter Oak has underwritten and managed the largest college scholarship program for Bridgeport public school students. Over 150 students have benefited from our efforts and received scholarships.

I am honored to have worked closely with former and current Superintendents and Mayors of Bridgeport who all have lauded our efforts. Since inception, we have donated over \$5 million and raised many millions more in furtherance of these efforts and helped launch the first Achievement First Bridgeport Academy Middle School in 2007. Last year, AF Bridgeport scholars demonstrated the greatest gains of any middle school students in the state, more than 50% better than any other middle school (please look at chart). Our goal is to ultimately serve 1700 deserving Bridgeport students, but I am fearful we will never get there. You see, **Achievement First's nine schools** and the other public charters in our state get only about 70% of their required funding, receive no money for facilities or their upkeep and rely on the generosity of donors to fund public school students who perform academically at Westport academic levels. Yes, charter schools are public schools. How shameful that this system remains in place.

The state needs to play a major role, by funding students based on their needs, not where they live, the school they attend, or politics. The legislature spends \$7 billion on education each year. This proposed bill is a solid solution. The proposed funding formula does not impact the state budget and it rolls out slowly over time so as to not adversely impact future budgets. This bill helps by

preventing over-funding of our schools. Under the current funding formula, a district school receives an amount for a child through state funding even if that child does not actually attend that school. Then, the state also has to fund the school that the child does attend. And, to add insult to injury, our yearly funding is a line item in the state budget subject to withdrawal. That is egregious. Clearly ECS is not serving its intended purpose and is broken. I never dreamed my Foundation and the generosity of others would be funding an annual shortfall of nearly \$2M, just for Bridgeport, not including the purchase of facilities and renovations, with the attendant risk that the balance of the funding we do receive from the state could go away. We want to grow and continue our efforts, but we cannot. Indeed, the AF system would probably be double its size in CT if we had received funding at the district average. We need a simple, transparent and fair funding system that offers us some comfort the state will be behind us for the long haul. This bill accomplishes that result.

I and many others care deeply about this glaring achievement gap and about underserved students. I feel grateful for the philanthropic work we are able to undertake. But, I cannot do it forever and it is inappropriate for this state to expect people like me to fill the gaps a broken funding system created. Fix the system. Do the right thing by these students and their families. I can promise you that very generous philanthropists within and without this state (and each of you knows of whom I speak) will not invest in a system with no certainty, unless you fix it now. Further, other high performing charters like KIPP and Uncommon will never consider coming to CT unless this funding formula is fixed once and for all. What a loss for our kids.

Every child should be able to attend a wonderful school, not only children of affluent parents. Every child can learn and grow, especially in a "no excuses" environment like ours. Step up to the plate. Hit a home run for our kids and do the right thing, NOW.

I am grateful for your time and consideration.

Achievement First Bridgeport Academy Student Growth Over Time Compared to Bridgeport Public Schools and CT State

