



Appropriations Committee Public Hearing – February 21, 2012

Testimony by Dacia Toll, President of Achievement First

Good evening, Representative Walker, Senator Harp and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Dacia Toll, and I am the President of Achievement First, which supports four public charter schools in the state of Connecticut – Amistad and Elm City in New Haven, Achievement First Hartford, and Achievement First Bridgeport – collectively serving more than 2,800 Connecticut students. I am here today to speak enthusiastically in favor of Senate Bill 24. I have spent the last 14 years as a teacher, principal, and advocate working to close Connecticut's vexing achievement gap, and it is inspiring to finally have a comprehensive plan on the table to address this gap and reverse the debilitating moral and economic impact it has had on our urban communities and our state as a whole.

I am here specifically to encourage you to support the Governor's proposal to increase funding for the state's public charter schools. I want to offer four points for you to consider.

First, while I know you are entertaining requests from many schools for increased resources, Connecticut's public charter schools have been uniquely under-funded since their inception. The state average net current expenditure (NCE) per pupil in 2010-2011 was approximately \$14,000 per child. In the big cities, it is often several thousand dollars more per child. And yet, CT has funded its public charter schools, which are overwhelmingly located in urban areas and serving high-needs students, at only \$9,400 per child – and this amount that has increased only 1% in the last four years. We simply cannot survive, much less expand, with such constrained and inequitable resources. An increase in our funding to \$12,000 will still leave us shy of the state average and the average in our host districts, but it will nevertheless be a tremendous step in the right direction toward addressing this historical inequity.

Second and more importantly, Connecticut's charter schools are getting results. More than any other type of school, Connecticut's public charter schools have the strongest track record of closing the achievement gap. Only 17 of CT's 1,100 schools are charter schools and yet, when looking at African-American achievement across the state, 3 of the top 10 elementary schools, 4 of the top 10 middle schools, and the #1 high school are all public charter schools. These schools are amongst only a handful in the entire state where low-income, minority students, selected by blind lottery, are out-performing state averages on achievement tests. We are especially pleased that AF Amistad High is the second highest-performing out of 195 districts in the state on the CAPT Writing Test – showing that students from New Haven can best students from Westport, Madison, and Darien on a test that assesses the vital, college and career prep skill of effective writing.

Third, the positive impact of Connecticut's charter schools goes beyond the students we serve directly. Charter schools were created by this General Assembly 15 years ago as a way of fostering innovation



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within the public school system. You allowed us to operate outside the traditional system, at times in competition with the traditional public schools, as a way of inspiring and compelling increased excellence for all schools. At times, candidly, this dynamic has created some tension – but it has turned out to be very productive tension. We are now very pleased to be a part of district-wide reform efforts in all three cities where we operate – reform efforts that were inspired in part by the example of our schools. Instead of being in competition, we are now working together to improve the effectiveness of all schools. In particular, we are excited to be running a year-long school leadership program that is training future principals and assistant principals for both New Haven and Hartford public schools. We know the chairs and others on this committee have championed results-based budgeting, and we hope that you are pleased with the results your charter schools investment has achieved both directly with students and more broadly in terms of systemic reform.

Finally, a word on the students we serve. The biggest critique I am sure at least some of you have heard is the claim that charter schools are not serving the same students as traditional schools, especially when it comes to high-needs students. In fact, many charter schools are black and Latino students and free & reduced lunch students at a percentage equal to or greater than their host districts. For example, AF's New Haven schools are 79% free & reduced lunch, while the New Haven district average is only 75%. In terms of special education, according to the most recent study of charter schools conducted by SDE, on average, 7.4% of charter school students qualify for special education services, as compared to 8.1% state-wide. Charter school students are admitted by lottery with no admission tests, interviews, or other requirements. All this said, we embrace the Governor's proposals to have more oversight over charter school admission and enrollment, and we welcome especially the ability to preference certain high-needs students in our lottery. One area where we would like to do better specifically is in serving English Language Learners (ELL) students – only 7% of our students currently qualify as ELL. We would plan to use the statute's new preference ability to increase the number of ELL students who are gaining admission to our schools. Based on our experience in New York, we think we will do well serving this population. At our Bushwick school, which has a significant concentration of ELL students, the school was commended recently for achieving exceptional gains for ELL students, defined as being in the top 20% for ELL student performance in NYC, for both reading and math.

I want to be unambiguous in saying that CT's public charter schools want to be open and accessible and ultimately successful with all students, especially those who are on the wrong side of Connecticut's achievement gap.

Thank you for your time and attention. As you make difficult choices over the coming month, I hope you will chose to make an additional investment in the hard-working students, gap-closing results, and transformative change in Connecticut's public charter schools.