Good Evening everyone, and thank you for this opportunity to be heard. My name is Dr. Anne Dichele, and I am a co-founder of the Side By Side Charter School in Norwalk, a Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8 School, and have served for the last 7 years as its Board Chairperson. In my "paying job" I am a tenured professor of teacher education at Quinnipiac University. I have devoted my entire working career to equitable public education and providing EVERY child with outstanding teachers – so tonight is a very important night – and I feel a tremendous burden right now, in the short time allotted to me, to succinctly and passionately help everyone in this room understand why passing this funding legislation is so very crucial.

In 1997, with six other dedicated and concerned educators, Side By Side Charter School was founded, one of only 12 Charter Schools to be approved, the first charter schools of Connecticut. In the subsequent 15 years since our founding, we have proven our success, fiscally and academically. The data that most heartens me is our long-term data – only recently available to us as our students have gone on to high school and college. We followed those students who attended Side By Side and graduated from our eighth grade, through high school and beyond. Of our first graduating class to be followed, 19 of 20 Side By Side graduates were in college – good colleges – and the 20th student had taken a year off to build houses in Alabama after Katrina...a 99% college attendance rate, a 100% high school completion rate says more than any test data could possibly indicate – these long-term goals are the true goals of education, and ones that we have accomplished.

We have been able to accomplish this, and much more, with very little resources. As Board Chair, I am constantly considering long-term financial concerns: the need to upgrade technology, the increasing costs of health care benefits and insurances, fuel bills, teacher and staff salaries, crumbling buildings - all must be accounted for with a revenue stream that has not increased a penny in years. This is simple math – it costs much more every year to run a school, and we have had to make our per-pupil allocation stretch to impossible lengths, while KNOWING that public schools less than a block away from us are receiving much more per-pupil monies than we are. This is patently UNFAIR – and without this increase in the per-pupil allocation, we cannot survive long-term – it is that simple.

I could speak to you about the specific things we at Side By Side intend to do with an increase in the per-pupil allocation – but I am sure you understand that when you have lived on a shoestring for years, the truly necessary items you put off buying; the basic capital improvements that you patch up for one more year; those things can now be addressed. But most importantly, this is an issue of EQUITY. I am in the unique position as a professor to be in many, many public schools throughout the state every week, observing student teachers, supervising intern students. I enter schools that are rich with working cafeterias, music rooms with instruments, art rooms with supplies, playgrounds and green fields, books and technology. I drive three miles down the road, and enter buildings that have little lighting, 28 children in a classroom that barely holds 20, teachers who make-do with limited supplies or additional help. This is NOT just about Charter School equity, this is about a state system of inequitable education that has gone on for years – and this is your chance to begin to do something about it!

I believe deeply in what we do at Side By Side, but I also know that what charter schools prove more than anything else is that in order to provide equitable education, we must get SERIOUS about the need to offer a variety of schools to meet the diverse needs of an increasingly diverse student population. We are NOT the answer to public education, we are NOT the only way to do it, but we ARE an important voice for choice - and we need a funding system that does not create arbitrary barriers to this crucial work.

I implore you to support the Governor's proposal. I honestly believe that support of this increased allocation will begin a new era in Connecticut public schooling, one that for the first time in years, legitimately acknowledges the sins of the past, and presses on with new hope for the future. It is in your hands –

Thank you...