

Testimony of Dacia Toll
Achievement First
Testimony submitted to the Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2013

Good evening, Chairpersons Harp and Walker, and respected members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Dacia Toll, and I am the co-CEO and founder of Achievement First. Achievement First has the privilege of operating four public charter schools in Connecticut, serving more than 3,000 students from the cities of Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven. I was the founding principal of Amistad Academy, which opened in 1999 and has been recognized nationally for closing the achievement gap. I am here today to ask you to build on the progress made last year through Public Act 12-116. Specifically, I urge members of this committee to support per-pupil increases for the State's public charter schools over the next three years and to allow for the creation of a handful of new public charter schools.

First, we respectfully ask that you support the \$300-per-student funding increase Gov. Malloy proposed in his budget for FY14. The funding cuts we received during December's deficit mitigation plan forced us to make painful, real-time cuts to our core academic program, and we desperately need that funding back. For FY15, we ask you move back to the original timeline outlined in the statute, which would fund public charter schools at \$11,500-per-student. Even with these increases, public charter schools will still be significantly underfunded. The state-wide average expenditure per student is more than \$14,000 and our urban host districts often spend more than \$16,000 per student.

I also ask you for this support because, most importantly, Connecticut's public charter schools are proving it is possible to close the achievement gap. At a time when resources are limited, we must invest those limited resources in initiatives that are getting results. As evidence of the fact that Achievement First schools are delivering on big promises, putting thousands of scholars on the path to college, I'd like to share some recent data on our success:

- On the 2012 state assessments, AF CT schools significantly outperform their host school districts in 76 of 78 grades/subjects tested.
- On average, our 8th grade students outperform their 8th grade district peers by 35 percentage points at goal— and they have completely closed the gap with the state average. As an example, in math, our Bridgeport Academy 8th graders outperformed their counterparts in Fairfield.
- AF Bridgeport is the highest-performing, non-magnet public school in Bridgeport, and Achievement First Hartford Academy is the highest-performing non-magnet school in Hartford. Amistad and Elm City are #2 and #4 in New Haven.

- For the last three years, 100 percent of seniors at Achievement First Amistad High School have been accepted into four-year colleges and universities. Achievement First Amistad High is consistently one of the top 10 performing schools in the state in high school writing—the subject most predictive of college success. In 2011, our 10th-grade writing scores were the second highest in the state, behind only Simsbury.

Finally, I ask that you support the creation of more high-performing public charter schools in our state. Charter growth in Connecticut has not kept pace with parent demand. In the last seven years, only two new charter schools have opened while it is estimated that more than 6,000 families are on waitlists for seats at existing charter schools. For the 2012-2013 school year, Achievement First alone received more than six applicants for every open seat at our Connecticut charters. In lotteries run by the district, our Hartford school is the #1 choice in Hartford for kindergarten parents, and our two New Haven schools are #1 and #2 for New Haven parents. Parents are searching for, and want, more high-quality public school options, especially in our urban centers where the achievement gap is particularly profound.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to continuing the progress we are making together in Connecticut.