Andrea Comer, Family Urban Schools of Excellence-Jumoke Academy Schools,
Appropriations Committee Hearing, February 21, 2013

Good evening Chairpersons Harp and Walker, and Members of the Appropriations Committee.

Many of you have seen me here before, wearing different hats. My name is Andrea Comer and this evening I am here representing Jumoke Academy and its charter management organization FUSE, as its Chief Operating Officer. But I am also here for the same reason I always come before you – in support and defense of quality education for children.

Last year was a watershed moment for our state. Our Governor and you, members of the General Assembly, took a courageous stand for children. The education reform bill improved the odds for every student - regardless of their zip code or socioeconomic status. I applaud you for your courage, and thank you for your commitment. The bill among other things increased funding for charter schools, an amount that was reduced in the midst of a budget deficit. Given that charters still receive less per pupil than traditional public schools, I urge you to restore funding to the originally approved level. This support will reaffirm that charter schools are valuable partners in educating Connecticut's children.

The bill also established the Commissioner's Network, which allowed for the innovative turnaround of four schools in the State. I'm proud to play a small role in one of them, the Jumoke Academy School at Thirman Milner. This is a unique partnership that allows us to collaborate with the Hartford Public Schools to improve outcomes for students at one of the state's lowest performing schools. We are excited for the opportunity to demonstrate that adults can put aside their philosophical differences and focus on the best interests of children. It was a process that truly involved building and flying the vehicle for change simultaneously, and it has not been without its challenges. But every day when I walk into Jumoke-Milner, I am reminded that every hurdle, every obstacle, every frustration is worth it. I have the distinct honor of playing a role in giving hope to children – some of whom had little or none.

Support for the Commissioner's Network is about more than allowing an entity to occupy a school. For us, it provides an academic assistant in every classroom, giving support to our dedicated teachers, who absolutely have their work cut out for them. It provides a reading specialist for a school where only 12 percent of the students are reading on grade level. It provides a staff person whose sole responsibility is addressing the needs of families, whether it is toys for the holiday, a ride to a doctor's appointment or a place to sleep for a homeless mother with four children.

There has been much talk about the additional resources that have been provided to the Commissioner's Network schools. I am puzzled why anyone would question whether that is necessary. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results. Is that really a game we want to play with our children? Last year, your actions let them know you weren't willing to take that chance. I ask that you make the same choice again, and continue to be a beacon of hope for children who have been let down long enough.

Thank you.