

Testimony of Michael M. Sharpe
CEO Jumoke Academy Schools/Family Urban Schools of Excellence
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My name is Michael Sharpe. I am the Chief Executive Officer for Jumoke Academy Schools and its management arm Family Urban Schools of Excellence (FUSE 180). I am also a board member of the Northeast Charter Schools Network.

Chairpersons Stillman and Fleischmann, and Members of the Education Committee, this is my 15th year testifying before the Education Committee – not on behalf of charter schools – but on behalf of the children of Connecticut. It never mattered to my mother, founder of Jumoke Academy, who educated our children – magnet, union school, traditional or charter public school. What mattered was that all children of Connecticut, regardless of zip code, have full access to a quality choice public education.

The significant questions of 15 years ago remain the very questions that we debate today:

- How do we close the insidious achievement gap between white and brown children?
- How do we ensure access for all children to a quality public education?

The public interest groups in Connecticut – educators, legislators, union representatives, charter schools and school districts – have collectively agreed on substantially little, if anything, over the years except that Connecticut continues to harbor the worst achievement gap in the nation. And lets be clear, with minor exceptions the achievement gap overwhelmingly refers to our:

- Urban children
- Poor children
- Most of whom are black, brown and Hispanic boys and girls
- Many of whom on state assessments perform 30 to 40 points below their white peers

States across the nation are getting it. They are not concerned about who teaches educationally disenfranchised children – traditional public or charters – but that whoever is doing it, does it right. And that no one is allowed to do it if they are failing our children.

For 15 years I have fought for charters to have fair, equitable and predictable funding on par with the real cost of providing education in the State of Connecticut.

What is not fair is when an urban charter school in one of the poorest and lowest performing school districts in Connecticut, successfully serving almost 100 percent minority students, continues to be underfunded?

Why then would legislation such as the Commissioner's Network pass that specifically forbids full participation by that school in helping struggling school districts to improve? Why would we allow legislation that sets conditions that morph the successful model of that charter school into a mini version of the failing school district?

I am disheartened because so many of you did gut-wrenching work last year to pass groundbreaking legislation that moved towards stabilizing education funding for charters that systemically addresses the needs of chronically failing schools.

Yet six months into the school year the state took it back. Today we are here begging that the funding levels established in last year's legislation stay intact.

I understand the state has a financial crisis and decisive action had to be taken. I am willing to share in that pain, but I am not certain the undereducated children in our state, who are the faces of this insidious achievement gap, can survive another 15 years of on again/off again by our state. How

many of us here have another 15 years?

Please, let's get this right!

It is disheartening when proposals are put forward benefiting adults and political expediency, but not the black, brown and Hispanic children of Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven and New Britain.

In closing, in spite of the legislative disincentives against Jumoke Academy Schools, we stepped up and took over one of the lowest performing schools in the State of Connecticut – Milner School in Hartford. Despite rantings by some adult detractors that we did not have the "stuff" to turn around a school with a special education population pushing 25 percent, a poverty index of almost 100 percent and a language learning population of almost 37 percent, we accepted the challenge.

Today, I am proud to report that an independent state department audit reported measurable improvements at Milner School this year in almost every category of the success indicators. Recently concluded interim winter assessments at Milner compared to the fall assessment administered in September showed strong sustained growth in the academics. But, we are most proud that the greatest growth indicators are in the areas of special education and language learners. A recent audit of the special education services at Milner concluded substantial and strong compliance.

I don't want to leave the wrong impression. The road remains rocky with many pitfalls, and we are far, far from achieving the mission. The cultural change and positive expectations on the part of students and parents is significant. Our parent engagement has been phenomenal. And, this first year clearly establishes that if we stay on course this battle will be won. Milner will turn around.

Yet in the middle of this school year our budget was cut by almost \$300,000. I am disheartened by how things stand to day because although we have the capacity to do another turn around school in Connecticut, our team is close to making a decision not to because of artificially legislated barriers to our success. We are vigorously being recruited by several states, and it breaks my heart that we are actively considering such.

We grew up in this state always thankful for the support and encouragement of Chairman Fleishmann, Representative McCory and others in the General Assembly. We have grown from a small, 150-student schoolhouse to today serving almost 1,000 Hartford students successfully.

Why am I fighting to be a valued player? Why are the other very successful charter schools who successfully serve many of our poor, urban students fighting to be allowed to succeed and be apart of the solution?

If a charter school successfully educates the children within its mission – including poor children, special education children, children at risk, kids of color – then make us a full partner.

Too long the interests of adults have trumped that of our underachieving students. I ask a simple request of you here today: if a traditional or non-traditional public school is successfully educating our children then fully support it in every way.

We need every tool, school and talent available to win this battle. This division based on the style of public school is adult nonsense and distracts from our battle with the real enemy – eliminating the achievement gap. Our children do not have another 15 years.

Let's get it right. The rights of children to a quality education trumps adult interests every time. Invest in success for our children.