

**Testimony Regarding
S.B. 1096: An Act Concerning Charter Schools**
Kenneth Feder and Rachel Leventhal-Weiner, PhD
Committee on Education
March 19, 2015

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Committee:

I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

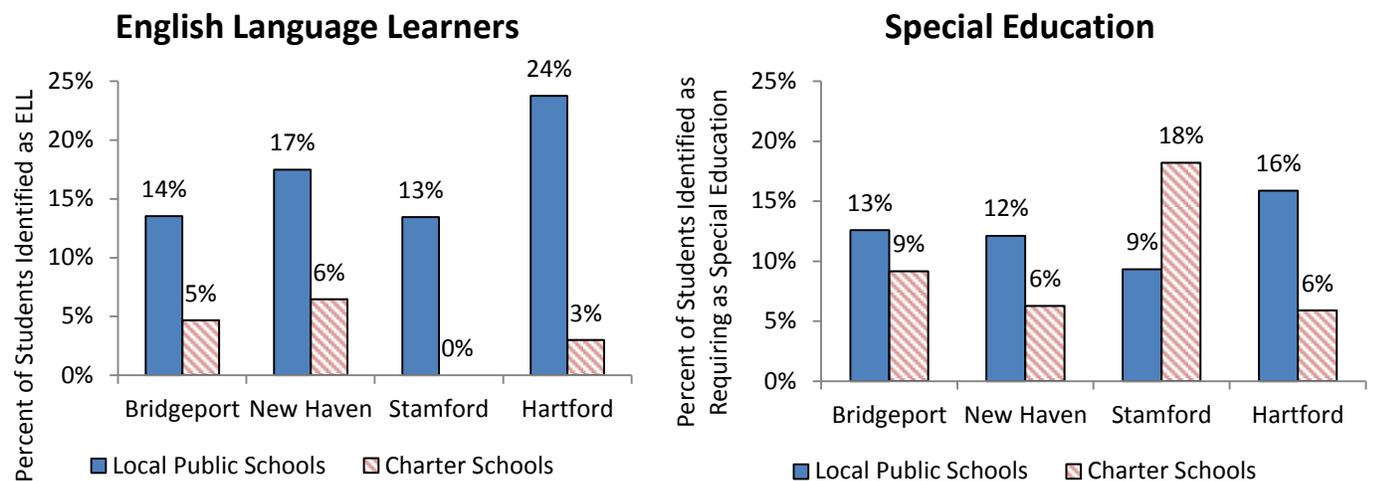
Connecticut Voices for Children supports requiring the State Department of Education (SDE) to develop a statewide charter school plan. We urge the Committee to require that the proposed plan address the following issues:

- 1. The role of charter schools in educating students for whom English is not a first language and students with special education needs, and**
- 2. The role of charter schools in State efforts to reduce student racial and ethnic isolation.**

Charter schools are a small, but increasingly important part of Connecticut's education landscape. Charter schools – public schools organized as non-profit entities that operate independently of local or regional boards of education – have four stated goals: (1) to improve academic achievement, (2) to provide for educational innovation, (3) to provide vehicles for the reduction of racial, ethnic and economic isolation, and (4) to provide a choice of public education programs for students and their parents.¹ In the 2012-2013 school year, 17 charter schools enrolled over 6,500 students, and enrollment has likely grown since then (because several new charters have opened since 2013).² Many of these schools have proved popular with families, and charter school enrollment in Connecticut has more than doubled over the last decade.³ Furthermore, because 10 of these 17 schools are located in Connecticut's largest urban centers – Bridgeport, New Haven, Stamford, and Hartford – these schools have had a significant impact on the educational landscape of these cities. However, despite this continued growth, charter enrollment still makes up only slightly more than 1% of public school enrollment in Connecticut.⁴

Students identified as English Language Learners (ELL) and students who require special education services are often underrepresented in charter schools. Under State law, charter schools may have their charter revoked if they fail to attract, enroll, and retain emerging bilingual students or students with disabilities.⁵ In spite of these protections, a Connecticut Voices for Children report "Choice Watch" showed that, in the 2011-2012 school year, Connecticut's charter schools tended to enroll fewer ELL and special education students than the local public schools in the towns in which they were located.⁶ (A similar finding emerged for interdistrict school choice programs such as magnet and technical schools).⁷ An updated version of these findings using data from 2012-2013 is shown in the figures below: in Connecticut's four major cities, local public schools consistently enroll three times as many ELL students and around twice as many special education students as charter schools located in those same towns.^{8,9} (The exception is in Stamford, where charter schools are specifically targeted at students who have struggled to succeed in a traditional public school setting.)

Figure 1: English Language Learner and Special Education Students in Local Public and Charter Schools in Major Connecticut Cities, 2012-2013



Furthermore, in spite of their stated purpose being to provide a vehicle for the reduction of student racial and ethnic isolation, most of Connecticut’s charter schools enroll over 90% students of color. Charter schools may be placed on probation if they fail to make measurable progress in reducing racial, ethnic, and economic isolation.¹⁰ Yet Voices’ Choice Watch report also found that, in 2011-2012, a majority of Connecticut’s charter schools were “hyper-segregated,” enrolling over 90% students of color. (This was in contrast to Connecticut’s larger interdistrict school choice program, the magnet school program, where very few schools were hyper-segregated.) In 2012-2013, this trend continued: all but 6 of Connecticut’s 17 charter schools enrolled over 90% students of color.¹¹ In fact, in all four of Connecticut’s major cities, the average charter school enrolled a higher percentage of students of color than the local public schools.¹²

The proposed state charter school plan should ensure that charter schools are a viable educational option for ELL and special education students, and that these schools are advancing the reduction of student racial and ethnic isolation. If ELL and special education students are underserved in most charter schools, then State investments in these programs will do little to improve educational opportunities for these already disadvantaged students. Furthermore, Connecticut law protects the right of children to have access to education in a racially and ethnically integrated setting, but charter schools typically do not increase opportunity for children to exercise this right. Any plan that does not address these two pressing concerns would be inadequate.

To ensure that, as they take on greater importance in Connecticut’s educational landscape, charter schools adequately serve disadvantaged students and further the reduction of racial and ethnic isolation, Connecticut Voices for Children supports the development of a statewide charter school plan.

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¹ See “Choose Success! A Guide to Public School Choice for Students and Their Families.” Available at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2681&q=335070>.

² See, CT Voices for Children’s Analysis of SDE Enrollment Data, Available Upon Request.

³ See, Robert Cotto Jr. and Kenneth Feder, “Choice Watch: Diversity and Access in Connecticut’s School Choice Programs,” *Connecticut Voices for Children*. April, 2014. Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/choice-watch-diversity-and-access-connecticuts-school-choice-programs>.

⁴ See, CT Voices for Children’s Analysis of SDE Enrollment Data, Available Upon Request.

⁵ See CGS Sec. 10-66bb(h).

⁶ See, Robert Cotto Jr. and Kenneth Feder, “Choice Watch: Diversity and Access in Connecticut’s School Choice Programs,” *Connecticut Voices for Children*. April, 2014. Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/choice-watch-diversity-and-access-connecticuts-school-choice-programs>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See, CT Voices for Children’s Analysis of SDE Enrollment Data, Available Upon Request.

⁹ Here, “local public schools” excludes all magnet schools and technical schools, regardless of whether they are operated by the district or by an independent entity such as CREC.

¹⁰ See CGS Sec. 10-66bb(h).

¹¹ See, CT Voices for Children’s Analysis of SDE Enrollment Data, Available Upon Request.

¹² *Ibid.*