

Testimony of Shyheim Russell
Student, Achievement First Hartford High
Before the Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee
March 3, 2015

Chairwoman Walker, Chairwoman Bye and members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Shyheim Russell. I'm a student at Achievement First Hartford High, and I'm here to discuss the Governor's proposed budget and how it affects my school.

I love my school. My school challenges me every day to become a better student, a better person, and a better leader. At first, coming to Achievement First was a big change for me. It was very different than my last school, and at the beginning I struggled to keep up. But this school is a family, and my teachers and classmates supported me as I discovered a new love of learning and a vision for my future. I now want to go to college at MIT. Before attending Achievement First, I never would have considered that a possibility.

That's actually what I'm here to talk to you about, because I'm not sure I'll be able to graduate as an Achievement First scholar.

Right now, our 11th grade class is the oldest at our school. We're supposed to have 12th grade next year, but, because it's a public charter school, that depends on whether the state approves additional funding. I know the Governor's proposed budget has that funding included and I'm asking you to make sure it doesn't get cut. My classmates and I want to eventually be seniors and to go on to graduate from Achievement First Hartford Academy. If the school doesn't add 12th grade, we won't get that chance.

Achievement First is a great school. Our teachers challenge us academically and expect the best from us at all times. They also take extra time to help us learn a new concept or to walk us through something we're struggling with. The support, encouragement and commitment I receive at Achievement First Hartford High motivates me to work hard and tackle things I never thought I could. I don't want to attend a new school and risk losing all that.

Public charter school students, like me and my Achievement First Hartford High classmates, shouldn't have to worry every year whether there will be state funding so that we can continue to advance to the next grade at our school. Please fight for me and my classmates to make sure our school has the funding it needs to have a 12th grade class.

In addition, all public school students, whether they attend traditional public schools or public charter schools, should be funded equally and fairly. However, charter school students get significantly less state funding than regular public school students. I ask you: are my classmates and I worth less than other public school students? Of course not. But the fact is our state's budget says we are not worth as much. That's not right and it needs to change, and I ask all of you to do what's right and to change the state's education funding formula so that all public school students—no matter what type of public school they attend—are treated equally and funded equally.

Thank you for listening and I hope my classmates and I can count on your support.