

Testimony on S.B. 1096

March 18, 2015

Dear Chairs Fleischmann and Slossberg and Members of the Education Committee:

I am a parent of one current Stamford public school student, and two graduates of Stamford public schools. I am also a taxpayer in Stamford. I am writing in support of a moratorium on charter schools akin to the one proposed in S.B. 1096. I would propose including in this bill more oversight and transparency in the regulation of both charter schools and Connecticut's charter authorizer, the State Board of Education. Given the SBE's lax oversight and willingness to approve charters with little investigation and over the express wishes of local communities, I believe such oversight is sorely needed.

Moreover, the consistent underfunding of our public schools while increasing both funding and seats at charters favors the few over the vast majority of public school students in Connecticut.

Our Experience in Stamford

As you know, in April last year, the State Board of Education approved the Stamford Charter School for Excellence (SCSE) for Stamford. This application was sprung on the Stamford community at virtually the last moment. The leaders of the charter school had never approached any Stamford public school official or Stamford official prior to applying for the charter. No one from that charter bothered to determine whether Stamford students need another charter school.

In fact, this charter school, which plans to serve at most 392 children from prek-5<sup>th</sup> grade, is not what Stamford needs. Stamford has a proud over 40 year history of intentional integration in our schools. We abandoned the blind lottery system for our magnet schools (yes, we already have "school choice" here) because blind lotteries resulted in increased segregation. Ignoring our experience, the SCSE plans to have a blind lottery, necessarily resulting in a segregated school and increasing segregation in our schools. Moreover, they plan to target children of color and low-income children. We already have two intensely segregated charters in Stamford- it is contrary to our children's and community's best interest to have yet another one. SCSE is to be run by those who currently run the Bronx Charter School for Excellence (BCSE). BCSE claims it will "eradicate" our achievement gap. That claim is empty. BCSE struggles with a large achievement gap in its own small school, and offers no educational practices that Stamford does not already do. The difference is that Stamford serves all children -- not just a handful.

Stamford residents, city and school officials came out in force to oppose the charter application, at the local hearing and at the SBE hearing. Approximately 800 Stamford residents signed a petition opposing

the charter. Neither Stephen Wright, the SBE member at the Stamford hearing, nor the full SBE, considered our opposition. In fact, SBE Vice Chair Hopkins Staten openly dismissed our concern, claiming she “really” knows what goes on in Stamford. I do not know the last time Ms. Hopkins Staten visited our schools- if she has ever visited.

At the same time the Malloy Administration, who issued the RFP for the charters without informing any Alliance Districts, approved and called for funding of this charter, it is also planning major cuts to existing programs serving ALL of Stamford’ students.

The Malloy administration is proposing over \$300,00 in cuts to our summer school program, approximately \$300,000 in cuts to our after-school funding and cuts to our Youth Services Bureau, which would likely result in the elimination of our promising restorative justice program at Westhill High School.

To cut funding for vital educational programs serving Stamford’s most struggling students, while rushing through an approval and funding of a charter Stamford neither needed nor wanted, and which does not fill any proven educational need, is wrong.

In approving this charter school, the SBE did no investigation of the failings at BCSE, no analysis of the impact to Stamford’s schools and budget and clearly trampled the will of the community. With this type of procedure at the SBE, clearly a moratorium is needed.

#### Across Connecticut

Stamford’s experience is not the only problem with charters in Connecticut. The scathing report issued in the wake of the Jumoke scandal gives a small picture of the panoply of misdeeds and possible crimes that occurred right under the nose of the SBE. In addition, the SBE allowed Jumoke to run Milner Elementary School in Hartford into the ground, even though as a Commissioner’s Network school, it was supposed to be subjected to heightened scrutiny by the SBE.

The Jumoke scandal did not slow the SBE down in its blind rush to approve any and all charters. After the revelations about former FUSE/Jumoke CEO Michael Sharpe’s criminal record and falsified academic credentials, SBE rushed through the charter application for Booker T. Washington school, originally intended for FUSE, without any investigation into the dubious record of the new leader or the questionable ties between the school and its contractor. In November 2014, the State Board unanimously voted to open eight new charter schools, without any regard to whether there are state funds to support these schools.

SBE routinely fails to verify charter claims, ignores community opposition and disregards its own rules against segregation in and over-concentration of charter schools. While punishing poor school districts, SBE routinely reauthorizes charters with poor records, excusing their failure to meet academic targets. (see, e.g. <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/Wendy-Lecker-State-uses-double-standard-when-3741280.php> )

While Connecticut owes billions of dollars to our neediest districts, officials provide higher per-pupil allocations to charters. For example charter schools receive \$11,500 per pupil from the state, but Bridgeport's ECS allocation is only \$8,662 per pupil. Bridgeport is owed an additional \$5,446 according to the CCJEF plaintiffs, not including the cost of teacher evaluations, the Common Core, and other unfunded mandates imposed over the years.

Connecticut increased charter funding over the past three years by \$2,100 per pupil, while our poorest school districts received an average increase of only \$642 per pupil.

Rather than draining the resources of our public schools to serve the approximately 1% of students who attend charters, we should reassess the charter movement in Connecticut. We need charter accountability, transparency and a coherent policy.

Suggestions for Charter Accountability and Transparency:

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform's "Public Accountability for Charter Schools," is a good starting point. The report outlines areas that demand equity, accountability and transparency: such as enrollment, governance, contracts, and management.

Connecticut must require, as a condition of continued authorization, that charters serve the same demographics as their host districts, through clearly delineated controlled choice policies.

Charter schools must maintain transparent and publicly available annual records and policies regarding enrollment, discipline and attrition. Charters must ensure that they do not employ subtle barriers to enrollment, such as strict disciplinary policies or requirements for parent participation as a condition of attendance. No such barriers exist in public schools.

Charters must prove that they meet the specific needs of the host community in a way the public schools do not. Charters must not be imposed over community opposition. State officials must assess the negative impact of charters on a district, including segregation and funding effects.

Charters must post all contracts and fully disclose revenues and expenditures. Charter officials, board members and employees must undergo background checks and disclose any relationships with contractors, state officials and others dealing with their school. Parents in charter schools must be allowed to elect charter board members.

Charters must show evidence annually that their unique educational methods improve achievement.

These are only some of the reforms that must be enacted -- and enforced -- for all charters, to ensure that these privately run schools are not shortchanging taxpayers, parents or children. In the meantime, Connecticut needs a moratorium on any new charter schools until this sector gets its house in order.

Thank you.

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