Appropriations Committee Public Hearing
Thursday, March 6th, 2019
Ruben Felipe

Good day Chairperson Walker, Chairperson Osten, and members of the Appropriations Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Ruben Felipe and I represent the Northeast Charter Schools Network. More importantly, I represent the more than 10,000 students who attend Connecticut’s 23 public charter schools and the more than 13,000 students who are currently on waitlists for public charters across the state.

Let me begin by saying that we applaud Governor Lamont for committing to fund the new ECS formula weights for low-income students, English language learners and students living in communities of concentrated poverty. And while these weights do not yet apply to all public school students who meet the criteria, we support this important first step.

That brings me to the reason that I am here today. As you are aware, in Connecticut, we implement a separate and extremely unequal public education funding mechanism. A broken system that continues to leave more than 10,000 mostly low-income, predominantly black and brown kids severely underfunded. The Governor’s budget takes some incremental steps in the right direction but I know that with your leadership and support we can do a great deal more.

Before I get to the ask, I want to provide some brief background on Connecticut’s public charter schools and who they serve:

- Connecticut’s charter schools are public, not for profit, tuition-free and accessible to all students through an open lottery process.

- More than 10,000 children attend 23 public charter schools in 10 cities.

- More than 77% of these children come from low-income families - almost twice the state average - and 88% of these students are Black or Latino - more than twice the state average.

- The students attending these schools are achieving at impressive levels. On the recent Smarter Balanced assessment, 83% of charter students outperformed their district school peers in English Language Arts, and 78% did so in math.

In short, public charter schools overwhelmingly serve low-income students of color. These kids are defeating racist stereotypes that seek to put limits on their futures. This should be celebrated not punished!

Yet because of how Connecticut funds public education, they have been profoundly underfunded. And this is once again true in the Governor’s proposed budget. Allow me to explain:
- Public charter schools in Connecticut are not part of the ECS formula and are funded at a flat rate of $11,250 per student. This is $275 per pupil less than the minimum foundation amount of $11,525 per student, as dictated in the state's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula.

- The Governor's proposed budget accounts for some grade growth but it does not fund all projected growth or chartered grade configuration among existing schools and provides almost no relief for the 13,000 kids on charter wait lists.

- In addition, public charter schools do not receive the additional "weights" recently added to the ECS formula, which increase per-pupil state education aid for students with additional learning needs.

These additional "weights" are intended for precisely the students that public charter schools serve, but because they are labeled "charter" these students are ineligible to receive them. On top of that, these children are denied the minimum foundation amount. These children - our children - deserve better.

There are concrete steps that the legislature can take this session to address these gaps:

1. First, we need to raise the foundation amount of per-pupil funding for students in public charter schools to $11,525 - the amount established by the legislature as the cost of educating a student with no additional learning needs.

2. Second, we need to apply the low-income, concentrated poverty and ELL weights included in the ECS formula to public charter school students who meet these criteria.

These weights could be phased in over a 10-year period, mirroring the ECS implementation and mitigating the impact on the state's budget.

We must end this practice of punishing kids for the type of public school they attend. We have a moral and constitutional obligation to provide our most in need children with the quality educational opportunities many of us are privileged enough to take for granted.

Thank you for your time today, and for your consideration.