

To: Members of the Appropriations Committee

From: Ronelle P. Swagerty, CEO of New Beginnings Family Academy and a charter school parent and grandparent

Date: Thursday, February 13, 2020

Re: Funding for Connecticut Charter Schools

Good afternoon esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee. I know your work is not easy and I'd like to acknowledge that publicly and thank you for your commitment to the state, its children and families.

My name is Ronelle P. Swagerty. I am the Executive Director of New Beginnings Family Academy public charter school in Bridgeport. NBFA serves 499 students, grades Pre-K through 8th. I am here today to make the case for supporting public charter school students in the budget and rejecting cuts that will unfairly impact many of Connecticut's highest need students.

I have been affiliated with NBFA for 16 of its 18 years. I have served as its director for the last five. Under my leadership, NBFA has transformed a low-income school serving 96% Black and Hispanic students from every corner of Bridgeport from a punitive, no excuses model with a 15% suspension rate in 2015 to one in which children learn by doing in a trauma-informed environment where consequences are largely natural and logical rather than punitive. As a result of this fundamental shift in pedagogy, our suspension rates have been under 1% since 2016 and the learning environment is healthy and nurturing. Same kids, different approach.

Research told us that such a drastic change would cause predictable dips in standardized test scores that would take up to five academic years to recover. Just four years later, in 2019, NBFA outperformed its host district in ELA, Math and chronic absenteeism rates. We outpaced the state in the percentage of students meeting their growth targets in both ELA and Math. In fact, NBFA's math growth rate exceeded that of the state. And, according to the 2019 Next Generation Accountability system results, NBFA ranks among the top three Bridgeport charter schools.

NBFA is among 21 charter schools in CT that provide parents and guardians the opportunity to choose a high quality educational system that best meets the needs of their child/ren. Families exercise their rights and choose charter schools in the same way that parents of means choose to move into well-to-do neighborhoods with abundantly resourced public schools or pay to enroll their students in expensive private schools. The only difference is that one set of parents can afford to pay tuition directly out-of-pocket and the other cannot.

Charter school personnel don't choose the students. We take whatever students come to us through a blind lottery system and do the best job we can educating them with even less funding than our cash-strapped host districts. In CT's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding formula, the minimum amount needed to properly educate a child is \$11,525, with additional funding provided if the child is learning English, low-income, or living in high-concentrated poverty. However, charter school students, who are overwhelmingly

Black, Latino and of low social economic status, only receive \$11,250 and NO additional funding for being low income, English learners or living in poverty.

Connecticut's charter school students already receive below the minimum wage for their education. Please don't sit by and let any more funding for the neediest students be taken out of the budget. As a state, we should be providing more money to public schools – traditional district, public charter, vo-tech or magnet - not less!

In closing, I want to say that I am not just the leader of a public charter school in CT. I am also a choice parent. My husband and I chose to send four of our six children to charter schools in Bridgeport and New Haven. And one of our grandchildren is a charter student in the Hartford area. So, I am here today not just as a paid employee. My family has real skin in the game. In each case, our school of choice has served our children well. My oldest daughter, now 26, went from an Achievement First School in New Haven into the prestigious Hopkins on scholarship, off to college in West Virginia and now helps run a social service organization that feeds and clothes the indigent here in her home state.

Professionally, it pains me to have to pay NBFA teachers, who have been dues-paying members of the Connecticut Education Association since 2005, less than their suburban counterparts even though they regularly face more challenges serving the population that we do. It is demoralizing to know NBFA needs literacy and math coaches that we simply cannot afford. It is unfathomable that my team and I have to go out and fundraise to make ends meet because our public school receives just two-thirds of the per pupil funds

allotted to the Bridgeport district. That's inequity! And it's no way to operate a school. Our children deserve better than that.

I implore you, members of the Appropriations Committee, to do the right thing by all public school children, but at this moment in time, I sit before you asking that you reject any notion of cutting funding for charter schools in the budget. The budget should NEVER be balanced on the backs of the neediest families in the state.

Thank you for your time. I am more than happy to take any questions. I would also like to extend an open invitation for this body, individually or as a group, to come see for yourself the amazing work that is being done at 184 Garden Street in Bridgeport every single day. No need to call to set up an appointment; just stop by NBFA at your convenience. You are welcome to visit and tour our beautiful school anytime.

Respectfully,

Ronelle P. Swagerty

CEO

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