

Appropriations Committee Public Hearing
Thursday, February 13th, 2020
Ruben Felipe, Connecticut Charter Schools Association

Good day Chairperson Walker, Chairperson Osten, and members of the Appropriations Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to share my testimony with you today. My name is Ruben Felipe and I represent the Connecticut Charter Schools Association. More importantly, I represent the more than 10,800 students who attend Connecticut's 22 public charter schools and the more than 7,000 names currently on waitlists for public charter schools across the state.

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 10,800 mostly low-income, predominantly black and brown kids severely underfunded. The Governor's mid-term budget adjustments only make this problem much worse, with a proposed \$4.6 million dollar cut to the charter school line item - a loss of about 410 seats.

We need your leadership and support to stand up for these students, some of the most underserved by our state, to not cut funding for these students.

As a reminder, here are the basics on Connecticut's public charter school sector:

- Connecticut's charter schools are public, not for profit, tuition-free and accessible to all students through an open lottery process. When demand exceeds the available number of seats, a blind randomized lottery is conducted to determine enrollment. There are no admissions requirements to charter schools.
- More than 10,800 children attend 22 public charter schools in 10 mostly urban and low-income cities.
- Nearly 65% of these children come from low-income families - over 20% more than the state average - and more than 85% of these students are Black or Latino - more than twice the state average.
- The students achieve at exceptional levels. On the most recent state assessment, on average, charter schools met or exceeded performance targets as compared to students in districts with similar populations by nearly 15 percentage points in English and 13 in Math. And they continue to receive numerous accolades, including being named Schools of Distinction by the State Department of Education and being ranking on the U.S. News and World Report Best High Schools in Connecticut list.

In short, public charter schools overwhelmingly serve low-income students of color at high levels. These kids are defeating racist stereotypes that puts 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 mid-term-adjustments. Here's now:

1. First, the Governor's adjustments cut the amount that this legislature approved last year

for charters by \$4.6 million, or about 410 seats. We are urging the committee to keep the funding that was in the line item as was passed by the legislature last year. This reduction would cut into schools with projected grade and enrollment growth among existing schools, all of which is made worse by the fact that families continue to demand these options and over 7,000 names are on the statewide waitlist.

2. Because public charter schools in Connecticut are not part of the ECS formula and are funded at flat rate - \$11,250 per student, kids in these schools are funded \$275 per pupil less than the minimum foundation amount of \$11,525 of the ECS formula, and do not have access to the weights intended for many of the very students that charters serve - low-income kids, kids in concentrated poverty, and English Learners. 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. These children - our children - deserve better.
3. This budget does not address the two outstanding schools that have been approved by the State Board of Education but have not been funded. These schools are ready to be open by high quality operators with demonstrated track records of success, but because of the way the state funds our schools, kids in Danbury and Norwalk are losing out on the opportunity for a great educational option in their cities - cities facing severe overcrowding in their schools and rising enrollment.

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

1. First, **fully restore the line item for charter schools exactly as was passed by this legislature last year.** While it is true that two charters will have been closed by the end of this year, this funding is desperately needed for existing schools and to ensure that kids can continue on in their school when grades are added.
2. Additionally, we need to **raise the amount of per-pupil funding for students in public charter schools to \$11,525 to match the foundation amount of the ECS formula.**
3. Finally, **apply the low-income, concentrated poverty and EL weights included in the ECS formula to public charter school students who meet these criteria.** These weights could be phased in over a ten-year period, mirroring the ECS implementation and mitigating the impact on the state's budget. Because the population of students in charter schools is comparatively small (less than 2% of the state population in PreK-12), the impact matches the small size of the sector.

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.