

Testimony of

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Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

SB 1096 An Act Concerning the Charter School Approval Process

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Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee, I am Ray Rossomando, Director of Policy, Research, and Government Relations for the Connecticut Education Association. CEA represents educators in over 150 school districts, including in three charter schools.

CEA opposes HB 1096, which would shift the decision to fund and expand new charter schools to the State Board of Education. As noted in other testimony presented today, such a shift would be an abdication of legislative authority to an unelected group of political appointees.

Prior to 2016, Connecticut taxpayers got a taste of what happens when state funding decisions are hijacked. Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) frequently and irresponsibly enrolled students into schools that received programmatic approval from the State Board of Education but had not been approved for state funding. To force the hand of the legislature, the CMOs enrolled students into schools they knew had not been funded and then bussed young students to the Capitol to lobby for funding – ostensibly using children as pawns.

During the ten-year time period when this practice was most rampant, state funding for charter schools ballooned from \$20 million in FY2007 to \$88 million in FY2015. This was an increase of 341% (37.8% per year) at a time when ECS grew only 20% (2.2% per year).

PA 15-239 was enacted to make it clear that such manipulative practices by charter school operators were unacceptable and that schools could not enroll students until the legislature determined that funding the school was the responsible thing to do. The decision to expand the charter school sector is one that should be determined by elected representatives. It is a decision that should not be taken lightly, and each school should not be determined in isolation of the impact expansion of the charter sector will have on local school districts and the state's interest in maintaining a public school system.

A recent analysis details the enrollment of charter schools in districts where expansion has gone relatively unchecked. The proportion of students in Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven who attend charter schools has grown from 3.5% to 16%. Even since 2015, when PA 15-239 was enacted, charter enrollment in these districts has increased by 43%, and this is during a time when enrollments in the school districts decreased by 14%.

How did we get to the place of creating a costly, parallel system of schools?

Statutory enrollment caps intended to prevent this very scenario have been waived by the State Board of Education.

Aggressive marketing and ad campaigns, many of which unfairly malign local public schools, have been carried out by charter proponents to capture “market share.” And we know that based on lax enrollment and recruitment policies, students who do not attend charter schools are generally more costly to educate, whether due to their English language needs, identification as requiring special education services, or socio-economic status.

After more than two decades of aggressive tactics by the charter school sector to expand, we are at a critical juncture. Over the past 20 years, funding for the charter school sector has increased by 867% while ECS grew 47%, a rate slower than the 65% increase in inflation during that time. We find ourselves living the tale of the boiling frog that has been sitting in a pot simmering water, slowly heating up until it is too late for the frog to jump out.

For some, cannibalizing the public school systems in urban districts (and beyond) is the goal. They are turning up the heat in Danbury, Middletown, Bristol, Waterbury, and elsewhere. For lawmakers, I ask, do you share this goal? When is enough, enough?

Shifting funding authority to the State Board of Education and abdicating legislative authority will leave future expansion unchecked. We urge policymakers to question whether continuing down this path is the right thing to do.

Thank you.