Good afternoon members of the Budget Committee. My name is Rick Pressler, and I am Director of School Services for the NJ Charter Schools Association. I have also been a charter school founder, trustee, leader, and parent, as well as most recently a member of the Roosevelt, NJ, Board of Education. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of the 88 public charter schools in New Jersey, the nearly 50,000 students attending those schools, and the many thousands of households currently on waiting lists for public charter schools.

I also deeply appreciate the work of this committee and its efforts to address the challenges inherent in developing a budget that balances the many legitimate needs facing our state.

I would like to focus on several considerations specific to public education and to charter schools in particular.

First of all, I would like to emphasize that the NJCSA is committed to working with the legislature to develop a school funding plan that addresses the current funding crisis in a way that is equitable and serves the needs of every child, without compromising the quality or value of their education. We do not believe it is fair to place the needs of one student over the needs of another; no child should be on the losing end of public school funding priorities.

We recognize that many charter schools and districts are feeling the crunch of limited funding at a time when costs only increase. For charters, this has always been the case—charter schools are historically underfunded; they have never, on average, achieved the 90% of district per pupil funding that was intended by the Charter School Act in 1995.

Despite the fact that charter schools are public schools, public charter schools continue to be excluded from certain categories of public school aid, the largest of which is adjustment aid. This aid is responsible for the most dramatic inequities we see between district and charter school funding in places like Jersey City and Asbury Park. Many of the ideas circulating in various hearings on school funding have focused on adjustment aid, and we believe this is a productive place to begin.

It is noteworthy that the proposed FY2018 budget helps mitigate a fraction of the historical funding inequities public charter schools have experienced, but we still have a significant way to go.
Charter Schools are Part of a Robust Statewide Community of Public School Options

Charters are just one of several different types of public schools in New Jersey. I would like to highlight a particular priority for allocating state aid that speaks to the needs of a broad range of public school students, especially those coming from economically disadvantaged households. This priority also speaks to the New Jersey Charter Schools Association’s commitment to the students from these families who comprise the vast majority of charter school students.

We believe it should be a high priority to preserve and expand access to the full range of quality public school options for all students, especially those whose families do not have the means to simply move to a high performing school district and who may not qualify for admission to selective district or county magnet schools. For these students, the realistic alternatives to open enrollment district schools are limited to:

- Interdistrict Choice Schools
- Charter schools
- County high schools with relatively open enrollment policies

For families seeking alternatives, especially in grades K through 8, charters and choice district schools, in spite of the uncertainty of the lottery process in both cases, can be the only alternatives to an assigned district school. New Jersey is often identified as a national leader in public education, but for families who feel they lack good choices for their children, the national stature of the state as a whole offers little consolation.

When viewed in their entirety, these options, along with Renaissance schools, selective district and county magnet schools, and schools that offer programs for students with special needs, define a valuable array of choices for New Jersey’s students. But our ongoing challenge is to ensure that it’s not only the wealthiest or most academically successful students who have options.

Preserving educational options requires that we balance the needs of families who utilize all the different types of public schools. This cannot be an either/or proposition between districts and alternatives—we have seen significant gains for all students wherever choice is available, especially for disadvantaged urban students. To ensure that our public education system offers effective options that meet diverse student needs, we must embrace the support of all public schools and the students they serve.

Funding reallocations are politically difficult, especially when viewed in terms of “winners” and “losers.” If we focus our attention on the wellbeing of all students and do our best to ensure that student needs and aspirations are made the top priority, we will come closer to the best possible solution. When we remember that economically disadvantaged students and their families—without the option to move to more affluent or higher performing districts—are especially dependent on public school options, we see that we can serve them best by ensuring there is a diversity of opportunities to accommodate the diversity of their needs.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and for your consideration.

New Jersey Charter Schools Association 2 March 22, 2017