Good afternoon members of the Joint Committee. My name is Rick Pressler, and I am Director of School Services for the NJ Charter Schools Association, the membership organization of New Jersey’s public charter schools. I am also a charter school founder, trustee, parent, and former school leader, as well as a former 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 families currently on waiting lists for public charter schools.

As the only charter-specific statewide association, we have an unparalleled access and insight into our schools’ operations, and we have made it our business to collect comprehensive data about all public schools, including demographics, academic performance, financial data, and anecdotal information from families, teachers, leaders, and boards. While we strongly advocate for charter schools, we do so because we believe it is one of the best, most efficient, means to bring new educational opportunities to students who desperately need and want them. We hope you will include our organization and our perspective in your ongoing work.

Who Do Charter Schools Serve?
To understand the significance of charter schools in New Jersey, you have to consider who and where we serve.

Charters predominantly serve a group of students who are urban, disadvantaged, and of color. In 2016, 70% of charter school students qualified for free or reduced lunch—about twice the state average. In addition, more than 80% of charter students were Black or Latino. Almost 90% of charter school students live in urban school districts previously identified as “Abbott” districts.

Charter schools also serve a growing number of special education students and English Language Learners—the number of special education students in Newark charters has doubled from 5% to 10% since 2009, even as the number in the district is decreasing.

Charter schools provide the most accessible alternative public education opportunity for students who have traditionally been denied choice. They are closing the achievement gap between our different demographic groups and parents are noticing—the demand for charter schools in urban districts such as Newark, Camden, Paterson, Plainfield, Jersey City, Trenton, and New Brunswick is unabated. Thousands remain on waiting lists.
The growth of charters has been fueled by their successful outcomes—and by parents who see a valuable opportunity for their children.

**School Funding Cannot Have Winners and Losers**

All students deserve the resources to be successful. We cannot elevate one type of public school above another and expect to achieve an equitable result.

The system, as currently configured, disadvantages students in numerous school districts; and charter schools in some districts—charters in Jersey City, Hoboken, Asbury Park, and elsewhere—receive far less than the 90% per pupil funding they are promised in statute. In Jersey City, the number is closer to 50%. Many charter families have students in both district and charter schools—they see firsthand how disparities in funding arbitrarily and unfairly disadvantage their charter school children. It is simply not sustainable to continue funding any of schools—charter or district—at far less than the state-defined adequacy amount.

We understand there is no way to fix charter school funding without addressing the entire funding system. There is no way to treat every student equitably without fully funding SFRA and ensuring that state aid is apportioned progressively. This means there are tough political decisions ahead. This requires building consensus and, importantly, hearing those who often go unheard.

**Collaboration: Charter and School Districts Working Together**

New Jersey’s charter schools are part of a broader system of public education that offers a range of options for students in addition to traditional, open enrollment district schools. These include:

- Districtwide magnet or special focus schools
- Interdistrict School Choice Program schools
- County CTE programs, including career academies, STEM schools, and Vo-Techs
- County Educational Services Commission schools
- Charter schools
- Renaissance schools

Each of these types of schools is enrolled and funded in slightly different ways. Some of the magnet and county programs are highly selective based on academic criteria; some specialized Commission schools serve exclusively special needs students; charter are enrolled through a lottery process without regard for a student’s level of achievement or special needs. Our challenge is to ensure that ALL students, regardless of the type of public school they attend are fully supported with the resources to which they are entitled.

There is a growing trend towards collaboration and sharing between charters and their sending districts. A few notable examples:

- Universal Enrollment in Camden and Newark has provided families with easier access to all district and charter options within their community.
• The Newark Public Schools has contracted with North Star Academy and Great Oaks Legacy to operate district schools, leveraging the innovative and effective programs these schools have pioneered.
• The Camden School District has contracted with North Star Academy and TEAM Charter Schools to replicate their groundbreaking charter school programs in the form of Renaissance schools in Camden.
• Many charter schools purchase services from districts for everything from special education services to lunch programs.
• Charters both offer and benefit from professional development programs shared by districts and charters (most recently at Philip’s Academy Charter School).
• This collaboration around professional development is growing: the Association and the New Jersey School Boards Association are currently planning a shared professional development program in which teachers from district and charter schools will share best practices.

We facilitate sharing and collaboration by coming together. There is no more important place for this than in our efforts to improve how we fund our schools.

We know that there remain misconceptions about charter schools—who we serve and what we have accomplished. These misconceptions are often cited as reasons to stall the growth of charter schools and deny new students the opportunities that charter schools represent. We find this unconscionable as long as there are families stuck on charter school waiting lists, hoping and praying for access. Our efforts should be informed by the “fierce urgency of now”—we should not deny families access to educational opportunities while others debate these issues.

We must do our best to meet the needs of our families as we balance the perspectives of all the diverse public school options that are available to New Jersey families.

**Charter Schools 20 Years In**

New Jersey’s original cohort of charter schools are now in their twentieth year of service, and there is an ample body of data and research to provide insights into their dramatic successes and their positive impacts on the lives of our children. Throughout New Jersey, but particularly in our larger urban centers such as Newark, Camden, Jersey City, Plainfield, Trenton, Paterson, and New Brunswick—cities where our largest concentrations of at-risk students reside—charters have helped tens of thousands of students rise towards their potential.

Over the past 20 years, we’ve also had the opportunity to study the evolution of public school funding, and how changes to budget language and other factors affect all our public school students. I believe one point on which all public school advocates agree is the need to fully fund SFRA and, in all cases, ensure that every student has the resources within their school to succeed.

This is necessary for every student, but we also can’t help but focus on our most disadvantaged, most vulnerable students.
New Jersey charters, through their urban focus, overwhelmingly serve disadvantaged students of color. Charters have brought alternative public education opportunities to families and students who have traditionally been denied such choices. But beyond our cities, charters also flourish, in smaller numbers, in rural and suburban settings, offering programs and serving student needs that are not otherwise addressed.

Newark, NJ – A National Exemplar

New Jersey’s charter school sector has become a model for the rest of the nation, with Newark’s charter schools singled as out as especially strong. A few examples from our Newark charters schools:

- **Best in the State:** Newark’s KIPP and North Star schools are now 2 of the top 4 high schools in the entire state at sending African American students to college—sending 90% or more of their graduates to 4 year colleges.¹
- **Best in the Nation:** In a study by Stanford University researchers that looked at the 41 largest cities with charter schools, Newark’s charter schools ranked best in the nation at boosting African-American student reading, and #2 in Math.² The study compared demographically identical district and charter students using an innovative “virtual twin” method.
- **Extraordinary Impact:** The same study found that the high performance of Newark’s charters was the equivalent of charter students getting 150 additional days of learning in Reading, and 160 additional days of learning in Math.³
- **Newark’s African American Students:** From 2006 to 2014, African American students in Newark were three times more likely to attend a school that is beating the state average in math and reading—nearly all of those new opportunities came from charter school expansion.
- **Charters are Closing the Achievement Gap:** African American students in Newark charter schools are now within 4 points of the state average in Reading and Math—a state average that includes some of the best public schools in the country.⁴
- **From 2011 to 2016,** charter school enrollment in Newark doubled and, contrary to this popular myth, this rapid growth did not result in the concentration of high poverty, high special needs students in the traditional district schools—in fact, the district’s poverty and special education rates fell over that time.⁵

---

⁴ 49% of Newark’s black charter students were proficient in literacy, compared to statewide average of 53%; 41% were proficient in math, compared to statewide average of 44%. Source: NJDOE 2015-16 PARCC reports, available at http://www.nj.gov/education/schools/achievement/16/parcc/spring/
⁵ District special education rates fell from 18% to 13%, and poverty rates fell from 87% to 78%. See NJDOE ENR Files, available at http://www.nj.gov/education/data/enr/; NJDOE Special Education Data, available at http://www.nj.gov/education/specialed/data/2015.htm
• Serving ALL Students: Newark charters have doubled their enrollment of special education student enrollment since 2009, growing from 5% to 10% of their student body.\(^6\)

• Newark charters also provide wonderful examples of district/charter collaboration: NPS has twice tapped charter schools—North Star Academy and Great Oaks Legacy—to assume the operation and management of struggling district schools. These schools, employing the innovative approaches of the charters, have experienced dramatic turnarounds.

**Beyond Newark – Diverse and Effective**

Charter schools were established with two purposes:

1) To provide opportunities to students who need them
2) To drive innovation and become laboratories for educational practice

As we look out across the State, it is clear that charter schools have evolved and grown to meet the grassroots demand for new opportunities. New Jersey’s charter networks—Uncommon, KIPP, iLearn, Camden Charter School Network, Philip’s Education Partners, and so on are homegrown, each of them having expanded in response to the extraordinary demands of urban parents and by virtue of their strong outcomes.

Beyond the basic issue of expanding opportunity, there are also many examples of charter school innovation. These are just a few:

• Innovative educational programs at rural schools such as Ridge & Valley Charter School in Blairstown and Sussex Charter School of Technology in Sparta have attracted a high proportion of special needs students, offering parents unique programs in earth literacy and technology that enable their children to succeed in a general education setting.

• LEAP University Charter School in Camden, in partnership with Rutgers Camden, has excelled at parent and community engagement, offering wraparound services to families that enhance the academic success of their students.

• North Star Academy Charter School has long been at the vanguard of data-driven instruction and student engagement techniques; their founders have been instrumental in developing the Relay Graduate School of Education—an accredited and acclaimed graduate program that fosters excellence in instructional practice.

• In New Brunswick, the Greater Brunswick Charter School has implemented a K-5 bilingual education program to meet the needs of its growing ELL population. GBCS significantly outperforms the district average in PARCC even while serving a higher percentage of special education and ELL students than the district. It is one of several multi-lingual charters, each of which takes a different approach to language acquisition.

• Charter schools such as METS in Jersey City, STEMCivics in Trenton, and LEAP in Camden are among the State’s high performing STEM charter high schools.

---

The Growing Cohort of Environmental Charters – ECO Charter School (one of highest performing in Camden), Unity Charter School (Morristown), Barack Obama Green Charter High School (Plainfield), Thomas Edison Energy Smart Charter Schools (Franklin Township), Ridge & Valley (Blairstown), and Philip’s Academy Charter School (Newark) all provide rigorous programs focused on environmental science and sustainability.

Charters, such as Compass Charter School (Vineland) have pioneered innovative, research-based approaches to learning that rely on an advanced understanding of the human brain and how different learning strategies map to different learning dispositions.

CharterTECH Charter High School (Somers Point) provides a unique CTE program that prepares students for careers in the Performing Arts.

The Camden Charter School Network, which includes Camden’s Pride, Camden’s Promise, Camden Academy, and Katz Charter School has grown organically into a comprehensive K-12 program with a stellar record of guiding students into 4-year universities.

There are many others—many of their accomplishments and innovations largely unsung as they focus their attention on their communities of learners.

Towards Equitable, Efficient Funding for All Public Schools

This committee has a daunting challenge: to rethink public school funding in a way that is equitable, efficient, and effective. You do so on behalf of the entire State of New Jersey and, especially, all our children.

Charter schools have proven themselves as an effective way to reach our historically underserved communities, and they have pioneered practices that are now firmly a part of adopted instructional practice.

We will succeed in our efforts only if we come together around what is best for children; only if we allow all voices to be heard, including those of the minority. Charter schools may educate only about 3% of our State’s children overall, but their impact in our most disadvantaged communities is extraordinary. It is impossible to imagine a comprehensive funding solution that does not include the voices of charter schools and the families they represent.

I respectfully urge you to include the voices of charter school families, educators, and trustees in the ongoing discussion. And I respectfully urge you to include the New Jersey Charter Schools Association—the only statewide organization specifically focused on the charter school sector—within the working group that will be examining funding going forward.

Thank you for this opportunity to present my testimony, and thank you for your service to public education in our state.