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

I am writing in support of the proposed regulatory changes that are designed to help charter schools more effectively and efficiently produce excellent student outcomes, as well as provide New Jersey families with greater access to diverse public school options and empower them to identify and enroll their children in programs that will serve them best.

I want to speak to two areas of revisions:

- those creating a pilot program for expanding charter school certification for teachers, principals, and school business administrators (N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-11.12 Requirements for the charter school certificate of eligibility (CSCE); N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-12.5 Principal; N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-12.7 School business administrator); and
- N.J.A.C. 6A:11-2.3(c) to allow charter schools that have been deemed high performing, based on the Performance Framework, for three consecutive years during the most recent charter term to be eligible for an expedited renewal review process

Certification

The quality of instruction and instructional leadership is a critical concern of all schools. Research tells us it is one of the top factors driving student outcomes.

Student outcomes are the number one priority for charter schools. This is codified in the Charter School Performance Framework, the Charter Agreement, and the entire renewal process, from the written application to the stakeholder interviews and site visits. No charter school can survive for long without demonstrating its effectiveness.
Charter schools must have excellent teachers with the right skills: extensive content knowledge, strong instructional technique, a professional disposition, interpersonal skills, and a deep commitment to educating the predominantly urban, disadvantaged students found in most charter schools.

It is significant that only high performing charter schools are eligible for this pilot certification program. We know, based on their student outcomes, that these schools both recognize and cultivate excellent instruction. What charter school certification offers is another path to bring in the talent they need to maintain and grow their programs. Charter school certification effectively broadens the pool of teacher candidates, much the way the Alternate Route Certification path did a generation ago. It gives us the opportunity to recruit teachers from science, technology, and other fields, as well as independent schools, and bring them into the classroom in successful schools that can nurture and develop their instructional practice.

Teachers learn most of their instructional technique through professional development, mentoring from experienced faculty, and the daily experience of working with children and families. No new teacher arrives fully prepared, regardless of whether they arrive through a traditional teacher preparation program, the Alternate Route, or charter school certification—what happens on the job at the school and district level is the most important part of their training.

All good schools know the value of professional development and invest heavily in it. Schools that have demonstrated academic success, especially when serving disadvantaged urban students, have also demonstrated in the most pertinent way that they recognize and cultivate effective instruction.

Charter schools are held strictly accountable for their student outcomes, and we should support their efforts to bring in the instructors they need to succeed. It is essential to give flexibility up front because charters are held so strictly accountable on the back end.

We know that all schools value instructional excellence. I would hope that once this approach is proven for charters it could provide a model for use throughout public education. charters are intended to be laboratories of innovation in public education, and it would great to see our school districts benefit from additional flexibility in teacher hiring within reasonable parameters. We should trust charters and districts with exemplary records to make wise choices in selecting candidates, knowing they have the capacity to nurture instructional excellence.

Similarly with school administrators, we need to expand the pool of talented applicants and provide more flexibility for schools to hire the people they feel are the best fit. Based on my experience as both a charter school business manager and lead person, I can attest to the importance of possessing a broad range of content knowledge and expertise, much of which is never addressed in traditional training programs. Particularly in charter schools and small school districts, where administrators perform diverse functions, we need flexibility in finding the talented individuals who can function in this way. The strict accountability measures governing charter schools will incentivize schools to select the best candidate for any given job.
Expeditied Renewal

The Charter School Renewal Process is rigorous—detailed, results-oriented, and comprehensive.

I have had the opportunity as a charter school board member, school leader, and district board member over the past 20 years to personally experience almost every iteration of charter school renewal as well as the recent iterations of QSAC, and I believe the current charter school renewal regimen is the most thorough and rigorous system of school accountability I have seen. It is systematic and data-driven, firmly grounded in the Charter School Performance Framework—a standard of performance that encompasses student achievement, fidelity to mission, financial performance, operational integrity and equity in access.

The Charter School Performance Framework sets high standards in all these areas; the Charter School Renewal Process, unlike QSAC for school districts, possesses true consequences for schools that do not meet these standards.

All charter schools complete comprehensive written applications and submit data on student performance (both mandated state assessments as well as other mission-specific student performance data); financial operations; and school policies and procedures that guarantee equitable access to the program. The new regulations do not change this. The charter school renewal application will remain results oriented, focusing on student outcomes, enrollment demographics, and financial data. Regarding finances, charter schools complete the same public school financial audit process as school districts—every detail of a charter school’s financial operations are publicly available through the audit and related documents.

What we need from the Charter Renewal Process is comprehensive data that enables us to ensure that schools are operating effectively and in accordance all pertinent laws and regulations. We need transparency. We need to know where to focus our attention.

By developing an expedited renewal process for high performing schools—one that still maintains the collection of all pertinent data but provides the Department with the flexibility to deploy its resources in a more targeted way, we reduce administrative overhead for both high performing schools and Department of Education alike, while ensuring that there is time and resources for examining other schools more closely.

We are fortunate in New Jersey to have a good number of charter schools that have performed at superlative levels for many years. They have demonstrated their commitment to their communities, to quality instruction, and to their own social justice missions. We should be looking for ways to help them do more of what they do best—educate our students—and do everything we can to reduce administrative work that can be addressed more efficiently or in other ways.

At the same time, we can give the Department of Education the flexibility they need to allocate resources as they see fit. New Jersey is at the forefront of charter school authorization and renewal, and we have seen, especially in recent years, an energized Office of Charter Schools that has improved every aspect of their authorization work,
from initial charter applications to accountability for operating schools to charter renewal. We should trust them with the flexibility these regulations provide to determine how best to continue that work.

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