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Good Afternoon members of the State Board of Education. My name is Harry Lee and I am interim president of the New Jersey Charter Schools Association. I want to thank you for this opportunity to talk about the positive impact that public charter schools are having across the state and what happened during the Department's charter review process over the last several months.

In October, Commissioner Repollet and the Department of Education announced that the state would begin a process of reviewing New Jersey's charter schools. Charter school families turned out in force to participate in the DOE's review process. More than 1,500 public charter school parents, teachers, and supporters turned out to charter review events in places like Newark, Paterson, Trenton, Jersey City, Atlantic City, Camden, and Plainfield. Thousands more filled out NJDOE's online survey in support of charter schools.

In many of these public meetings, the support for charter schools literally spilled out into the streets. On October 16, during the first community meeting in Paterson, more than 200 charter parents and supporters turned out and had to line up in the hallways to provide input to the Department of Education about why they love their charter schools. On November 1, 400 Jersey City charter school parents, students, educators and supporters marched from BelovED community charter school to the Jerry Walker Center to raise their voices for fair funding for charter schools in Jersey City.

It is clear that charter schools are a valued public school option in New Jersey. Today, there are 88 public charter schools operating in New Jersey serving more than 50,000 students. While charter schools are located in 40 cities across 17 of New Jersey's 21 counties, most charter schools are concentrated in our urban districts. Fifty-one percent of charter school students are Black, 34% are Hispanic, 72% are economically disadvantaged, 10% are students with disabilities, and 4% are English language learners. There are more than 35,000 students on charter school wait lists.

There is a reason why parents and students are voting with their feet. Charter schools are providing a safe, warm, welcoming school environment and a great, innovative education for their kids that best meets their needs. For example, in Newark, which is the second highest performing charter sector in the nation, charter school students have made extraordinary progress and outperformed the state average on PARCC in ELA and math for the first time in 2018. Let me repeat that – charter students in Newark, more than 80% whom are economically disadvantaged, are outperforming the state average on statewide assessments in ELA and math. This is a truly remarkable accomplishment since New Jersey has one of the best public school systems in the nation.

I want to be clear that the NJ Charter Schools Association supports all public schools that are providing a quality education to kids – both district and charter. As a policy making body, it is critical for the State Board to increase educational opportunity for all families choosing a traditional public school or a public charter school. Parents don't care about school type or label – they care about what is best for their kids. Let's make sure the Department's charter review focuses on what is best for kids – not adult special interests. We know that those who oppose charter schools want to stop charter growth by implementing district control over charter schools. Any measure to give control to the local school district would essentially stop future charter schools from opening. Simply put - any pause or moratorium on charter schools hurts kids that need additional quality public school options.

On December 5, parents and other charter supporters held a press conference to discuss the success of charter schools and how to improve the charter policy environment. The NJ Charter Schools Association released a report that included recommendations to fairly fund charter schools, increase access to facilities, and to increase charter autonomy. This report was sent to all members of the State Board of Education and provides background on how charters are thriving in spite of an unfavorable policy environment.

Lastly, I want to address the false narrative that charter schools are not held accountable. Let me be clear - charter schools are the most highly accountable public schools in the state. Charter opponents are improperly defining the word accountability. Charter schools that are failing students are closed, the ultimately form of accountability. Since 2010, two dozen charter schools have been closed. If traditional districts were measured against the standards within the Charter School Performance Framework, dozens of struggling districts would likely be forced to close due to these higher expectations. As we know, that does not happen. QSAC reviews, the accountability system used for school districts, are conducted every three years, and are largely focused on inputs/compliance with limited consequences. Charter schools are evaluated annually and the review is focused on student outcomes. Many districts would be forced to close and not have the privilege of serving children if they were held to the same standards as charter schools.

I ask that the State Board of Education focus on what charter accountability focuses on – what is best for kids. The mission of the Department of Education is to ensure that all kids graduate high school ready for college and career – charter schools have proven that they are an important component to making this vision a reality.

Thank you for your time and consideration.