

Written Testimony in Support of S2787

Dear esteemed senators of the Senate Education Committee:

I regret that I am unable to attend today's hearing in person and to provide live testimony but, as I have a school committee meeting this evening, I hope my absence can be excused.

I am Lynn Bouvier Kapiskas and, as a member of the Woonsocket School Committee for the last eight (8) years, I support Senate Bill S2787 which proposes a moratorium on the creation and/or expansion of charter schools not previously approved before July 1, 2025. I have been a front-row witness to the negative impact that unbridled charter school development can have upon district public schools. It is my position that, until the State of Rhode Island, figures out a fiscal structure to fund both public and charter schools in a manner which is appropriate and fair to ALL students, we need to pause the further expansion of charter schools, including both independent charters and mayoral academies. Under the current structure, charter schools simply drain funding from traditional public schools while giving the municipalities who participate no oversight over how the public funds they are forced to contribute are expended. In my community (Woonsocket), one of the charter schools which the city hosts has cost \$800,000 in prior fiscal years under this structure with an anticipated further drain of approximately \$1.5 million going forward into the next fiscal year. The result is a loss of staff and supports for the very needy public school students attending our Woonsocket public schools.

Under the current state funding formula, the state aid received to fund public education "follows the student" and, therefore, any increase in the number of charter school seats has the corresponding result of decreasing the fiscal resources from traditional public schools.

Both sides of the General Assembly and the governor must find a way to work together to figure out a fair and equitable way to adjust the current funding formula for education so that it treats public schools and charter schools equitably. Currently, the formula fosters a system whereby districts are required to simply cut a check to the charters with no further oversight by those charged with the management of those public funds (school committees) based solely upon on the number of students attending the respective charters from their community, essentially giving those charters a blank checks and thereby making those funds, previously used to fund traditional public schools, unavailable for that purpose. Yes, while charters are undertaking the education of public school students who literally "win a lottery" for a seat, this does not decrease the costs of operating the public schools which face the same infrastructure costs but with less money to fund those costs. Remember please that the transfer of students piecemeal from a sending public school district does not decrease that district's expenditures for infrastructure (staffing, supplies, utilities, etc.)

unless an entire classroom and all of its students “win the lottery” and move to a charter school and we can close the room! Our number of classrooms remains unchanged and so do the fixed costs connected to running each of those classrooms.

The only thing “public” about charter schools is that they are funded with public funds. They privately determine how their school is run, how it is controlled, what curriculum will be used – all while providing no real oversight to the communities which are forced to fund them under Rhode Island charter school laws.

All of us in the state have an obligation to educate ALL children in all of our public schools. We cannot properly fulfill that obligation while we continue to drain millions of dollars from our traditional public schools (whose costs only increase and never decrease as a result of the existence of charters - existing or new) to disproportionately support the students attending charters.

Data shows that charters often serve lower proportions of high needs students, such as students who have intensive special educational needs or multilingual learner services, resulting in these students remaining in (or returning to) districts which now have fewer resources to address their needs.

Furthermore, many of these charters have no specific goal/magnet which is drawing student to them (arts, sciences, STEM, etc.) and, in essence, serve only as parallel school systems. While they all focus on “college prep” labels, I can personally assure you that, as part of RIDE’s advisory committee that developed the new graduation requirements in Rhode Island, all traditional public schools are now “college prep” and there is nothing unique about the charters in this particular area. They are simply parallel school systems to the traditional public school system – a parallel system which is supported by public funds without any public oversight and which education only a small portion of the students needing an education. Rather than focusing on creating any number of additional charter school systems, Rhode Island should focus first on improving the 39 traditional public schools systems which already exist, especially in a state of this size.

The proposal before you would pause new charters, freeze the expansion of existing charges and reduce the statewide cap on charters to give the legislature time to focus on how to appropriately fund both traditional public schools as well as charter schools. The current model that “the money followed the student” continues to drain millions of dollars from district public schools, making it harder to maintain their infrastructure and funds programs for the students who remain in the traditional setting and creating structural budget deficits for these traditional public schools.

A moratorium is not “anti-charter”. It simply recognizes that charters could be a vehicle to improve education across school districts and not just in the charter schools themselves.

Sincerely,

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