

Testimony on
"Education Reforms: Exploring the Vital Role of Charter Schools"
before the
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
of the
U.S. House of Representatives
by
DeAnna Rowe, Executive Director
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on
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Good afternoon, Chairman Hunter, Congressman Kildee, and members of the Subcommittee. I am DeAnna Rowe, Executive Director of the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools and I am pleased to be here today to contribute to your discussion of the vital role that charter schools play in education.

Charter schools provide options for families that want the benefits of a public education for their children but desire the ability to select an instructional model and educational environment where they believe their students will thrive. The presence of charter schools in the American education landscape provides a level of competition that works to increase school quality while at the same time increasing the accountability measures for all public schools. If the desired end in public school reform is improved educational results for all children, then charter schools play an important role in this common goal for quality public schools.

In my capacity as the executive director of the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools ("Charter Board"), I'd like to share my perspective of how an authorizer creates and monitors the performance of charter schools to ensure their quality which is vital to our pursuit to improve public education in Arizona.

As an authorizer in Arizona, I have the pleasure of working within a charter school law that:

- 1) Supports the creation of various educational opportunities without boundaries for operations; we have charter schools in 14 of our 15 counties
- 2) Does not restrict the number of charter schools that can operate or limit the enrollment at its schools; we have 385 charter holders in Arizona operating 512 charter schools serving 123,633 students. This translates to one in every 4 public schools in Arizona being a charter school serving 12% of the Arizona's public education population.
- 3) Provides for autonomy in charter school operations and includes flexibility within their organizational structures. The law provides for authorizers to contract with a public body, private person, or private organization. This variety in ownership and management structures, as well as variations in governance, creates a rich collection of operations that produce some of the strongest charter schools in the nation. This flexibility of structures also allows charter holders to respond quickly to educational needs. The inclusion of the private sector provides opportunities for the active involvement of individuals outside the traditional educational arena and incorporates an

additional skill set in the development of instructional programs and operations of the school.

- 4) Provides exemptions from many state laws and district regulations. Charter holders use these exemptions to implement instructional programs such as Montessori, Expeditionary Learning, back to basics and performing arts focused schools which are not often found in the traditional public schools. The law allows for charter schools to act as incubators for innovation, creating schools that are responsive to community needs and current educational research.

With a strong charter school law that establishes a solid foundation from which an authorizer can grant charters and hold schools accountable to quality performance standards, it is incumbent upon the Board, as an authorizer, to grant charters to applicants that demonstrate a quality educational program that is supported by a sound business plan which will be managed by individuals or entities that demonstrate the capacity to effectively utilize state resources. By doing so, it creates a vast array of choices for families from which educational decisions can then be made based upon program choices that are considered the best fit for the children, school locations, and other factors deemed important to the family.

Over 15 years of authorizing, the Charter Board has experienced many iterations of the “new charter application,” each one considering lessons learned and improving on past versions in an effort to capture the key components that will ensure the establishment of an additional quality charter school option when approved. As in much of its work, the Charter Board has utilized the National Association of Charter School Authorizer’s Principles & Standards as a resource and a guide in improving its practices.

In its endeavor to provide quality choices, the Charter Board has also established replication criteria which, when met, provide a successful charter holder a streamlined process to open additional schools. Replication has been an efficient process for expanding the number of quality choices available to families.

With the receipt of Federal Charter School Program Funds in 2009, the Arizona Department of Education established the Arizona Charter Schools Incentive Program to support the start-up of new, high-quality charter schools in Arizona over the next five years. This program is focused on creating schools in urban and rural areas that will serve students at risk of not succeeding. Because these sub-grants encourage replication of quality schools, there has been an increase in the number of replication applications submitted to and approved by the Charter Board. After two years, early results are showing that the increased funding to support these schools in planning and implementation is yielding significant academic gains.

An authorizer’s role in conducting ongoing oversight to evaluate performance and monitor compliance is the means to the desired end result – a portfolio of quality schools. In its efforts to assure that all approved charter schools provide a learning environment that improves pupil achievement, in accordance with the law, the Charter Board has created a level of oversight that holds schools accountable to quality standards while protecting their autonomy which ensures the flexibility and independence of their operational practices which is instrumental to their success.

In evaluating the charter school's efforts to maintain quality standards of operation, the Charter Board considers the following: First, the success of the academic program, including academic achievement; next, the viability of the organization, including fiscal management and compliance, and finally, the charter holder's adherence to the terms of the charter.

As with its new application, the Charter Board's oversight processes have continued to be refined. Keeping "fair and transparent" as well as "autonomy for performance" at the forefront of the development of all policy, the Charter Board recently revised its oversight processes placing academic performance at its core. The Charter Board established a Level of Adequate Academic Performance (LAAP) that provides a means to measure academic improvement from one year to the next, replacing its use of the State's academic accountability system which provided a means to monitor school performance by way of a performance label.

The LAAP is based on a combination of individual student level growth (Arizona Growth Model) and raw test score data to determine whether schools are teaching kids what they need to know and how fast the school is "catching up" its struggling students. The analysis of the data and development of the Arizona Growth Model must be credited to the Arizona Charter Schools Association ("Charter Association"). The Arizona growth model is a replication of the Colorado growth model, developed by Damian Betebenner of the National Center for Assessment, and used for state-wide accountability. In addition to Colorado, Massachusetts has also adopted this growth model for its statewide system. The Charter Association's exploration and the Charter Board's adoption of this model were made possible through the US Department of Education's National Leadership Grant titled "Building Charter School Quality".

In evaluating school performance for five-year interval reviews, in consideration of requests for expansion, and in making renewal decisions, the Charter Board looks at graphs that contain multiple years of data over time instead of a single point in time. Examples of the graphs have been included in the Appendix. When viewed over multiple years, policy-makers and parents can identify schools that are consistently strong in growing their student's level of knowledge, or those that are consistently weak.

The Charter Board pioneered the use of the growth model which has now gained general acceptance across the state as a means to measure student achievement. The Charter Association has provided administrators in both charter schools and public school districts with access to data and professional development regarding the use of the Growth Model to evaluate student achievement. Administrators were trained to interpret the growth model data and make informed instructional decisions. Recently, as the State Board of Education explored the most appropriate means to calculate the State's new system for identifying school academic performance, it too evaluated the growth model. During its May meeting, the State Board of Education finalized the new AZ LEARNS formula incorporating the use of the Growth Model to measure academic performance of all public schools in Arizona.

A change in the way public schools are evaluated is an explicit and notable example of how the inclusion of charter schools in Arizona's education system has contributed to improving public education in Arizona. There are other examples as well. Charter schools, through their

provision of varied and innovative quality academic programs are having an impact on the decisions made at the local school level. Districts, in their continuous effort to provide the best educational opportunities for their families, have devoted resources to researching charter school operations and what makes charter schools attractive to parents. The best practices and programs of instruction found to be effective in our charter schools are now being implemented in district schools as well, further expanding quality opportunities for all students.

Charter schools provide a range of benefits for students and their families in Arizona. Not only do the schools provide an alternative for families to find the environment that will allow each student to reach his or her full potential, but they have proven to be a tremendous source of innovation, providing all schools with new tools and methods of improving student achievements. Charter schools have also proven to be role models for districts around the state. They have presented alternative instructional and organizational models that districts can use to improve the education for all children.

Because of strong, progressive charter school legislation, charter schools in Arizona are not a threat to public education but rather an integral part of a complex system that is rapidly adapting to meet the needs of all children.

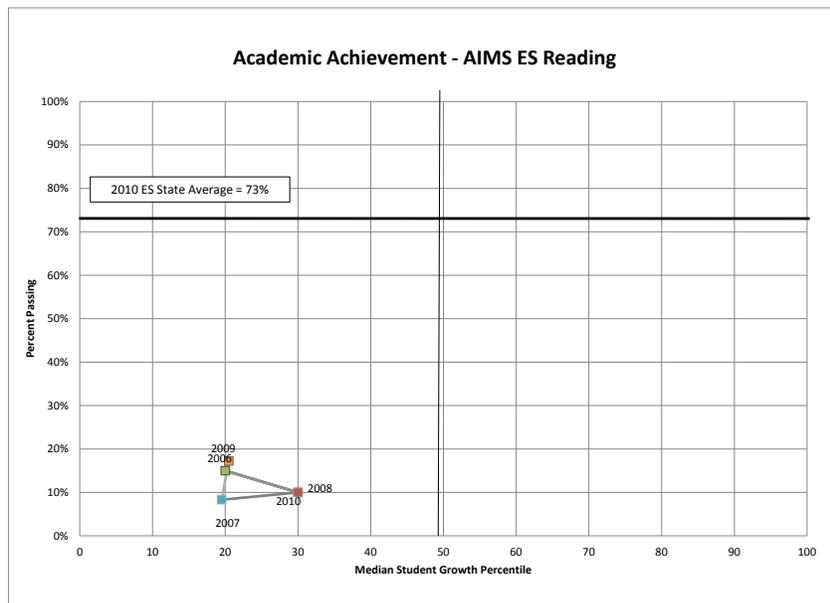
Thank you, again, for the opportunity to present this information to you today. I am happy to provide the Subcommittee with additional information that it may deem necessary or helpful, and to answer any questions from the members.

Appendix

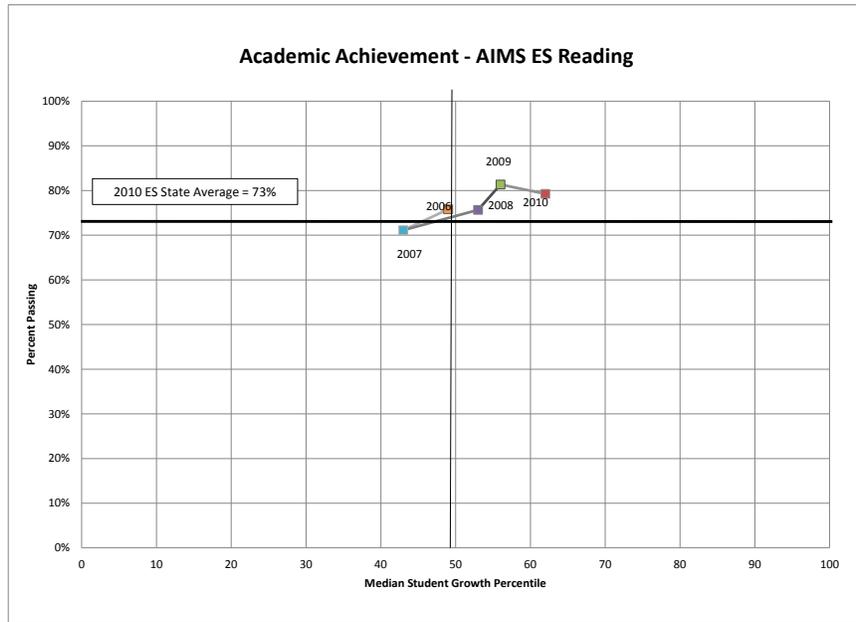
The Arizona Growth Model shines a spotlight on Arizona’s most effective schools—district and charter—that produce the highest sustained academic rates of growth in students. This helps parents, schools and policymakers to focus on quality schools moving students academically forward and those schools that may need intervention as students struggle to learn and understand state standards in math and reading. Most importantly, the collaboration directly benefits over 700,000 school children in Arizona.

The growth model uses scores from the Arizona norm-referenced state assessment for every student in the state. This volume of data allows for clear patterns in student level growth to be compared across individuals over time. The Arizona growth model is a replication of the Colorado growth model, developed by Damian Betebenner of the National Center for Assessment, and used for state-wide accountability. In addition to Colorado, Massachusetts has also adopted this growth model for its statewide system. The Charter Association’s exploration and the Charter Board’s adoption of this model were funded through the Federal Building Charter School Quality Grant.

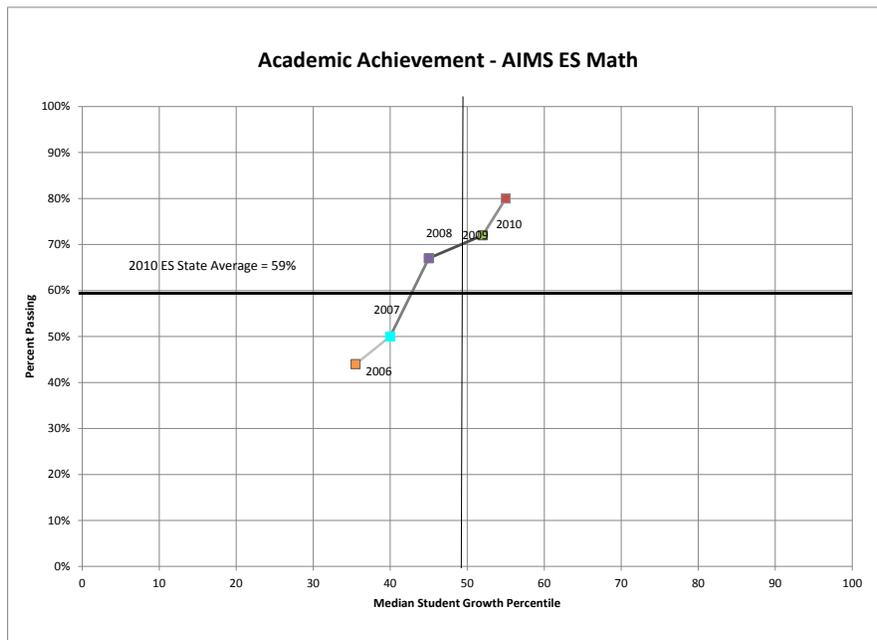
The LAAP is created by drawing two lines on a graph: one that identifies that state average percent of students proficient in a core content area, (reading and math) and a second line that represents the median student growth percentile (Arizona Growth Model) in the same content area. In its simplest explanation, this measure, when plotted over time, provides a graphic demonstration of a school’s success in improving the academic performance of its students. The graphs below depict the academic performance of three different schools.



Graph A: Low percent passing the state mandated test and low student level growth. This school would not be eligible for expansion and would be placed on a corrective action plan. If performance did not improve over time, the school would be closed.



Graph B: Average percent passing the state mandated test and improved student level growth. This school would be eligible for expansion and would not be placed on a corrective action plan. In response to strong academic performance, this school would maintain its flexibility and independence.



Graph C: Significant improvement in percent passing the state mandated test over time and improved student level growth. While not eligible for expansion in its early years, this school would be eligible for expansion based on improved performance over time and would no longer be on a corrective action plan. In response to improved academic performance, this school would regain its flexibility and independence.