



Testimony of Robin J. Lake
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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Kline, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

Charter schools are responsible for some of the most important school district reforms at work today. This is especially true in some major urban districts where people had largely given up hope that reforms would ever overcome decades of dismal school performance.

This was not the case even a few years ago. Most districts either ignored charter schools hoping that they would be a passing fad or tried to marginalize their impact by lobbying for state charter caps or limited funding.

But district leaders are coming to realize that charters have an important and -- in some cases a game-changing role -- to play in public school improvement. Let me give you just a few examples.

In New Orleans, 60% of all public schools are now charter schools. At first this was simply a practicality. After Hurricane Katrina, charters run by non-profits were the first schools able to open quickly enough to serve local students. But now the Recovery School District is actually turning district-run schools into

charters because they are simply outperforming district schools. Seventy-six percent of charter schools in the Recovery School District were considered Academically Acceptable in 2009 compared to only 15% of the RSD operated schools.

As school choice becomes the norm in New Orleans, poor parents are developing a new attitude. After years of accepting sub-par schools because it was their only option, they are now coming to believe that their kids are actually entitled to schools that will fully prepare them to go to college.

In Denver, successful college prep charter schools now take the place of district schools that failed students for decades. The superintendent doesn't think of his job as running a school system. He runs a *system of schools*. His job is to get the best schools possible to the kids in Denver. He doesn't particularly care what they are called.

In New York City, district officials say that after having repeatedly tried and failed to fix their worst schools they have no choice but to turn to charter schools. District officials actually lobbied their state legislature to lift a statewide cap on charters so that they could replace more failing schools.

These district leaders all have different reforms in the specifics. But they have one thing in common. They believe that their work is too urgent and too important to close off any viable options. They see charter schools not as a threat but as an opportunity to overcome school system inertia. They see charters as a way to give them the political leverage they need. Instead of trying to compete with charters, they are co-opting them.

Here are four specific things that charter schools offer smart districts.

- 1) Talent: District leaders know that they can't fix their public schools without great people. Charter schools attract entrepreneurial teachers, principals, and even central office staff who wouldn't otherwise choose to work in public education.
- 2) The opportunity to start schools from scratch. It is much easier for districts to close low-performing schools if they can announce that a charter school with a proven model will take its place. And it is much easier to close and reopen a school than to try to fix a school with a persistent toxic culture of failure.
- 3) Proof that things can be better. The presence of even one charter school that is sending all of its poor and minority students to college can be a game changer for an urban superintendent. It can take away excuses that district schools can't do better and it can inspire people to want to make politically difficult decisions.
- 4) Urgency to resolve differences. A healthy charter sector can act as a common enemy that actually can bring district management and unions to the table to negotiate new contracts that work better for students in all schools. As a result of competition from various choice options, Minneapolis Public Schools dropped from the largest to the fourth-largest district in Minnesota in just a few years. This downsizing led to massive teacher layoffs. The Minneapolis teachers union responded by pushing for new state legislation to allow autonomous, but still unionized, district schools.

There are many examples of district leaders who are getting past the charter label and are using charters to do what they wanted to do anyway. But I know that many of you hear from school district leaders who are losing students to charter schools and see that as a threat.

In response to those complaints, many states have capped charter school growth to protect districts from charter competition. Others have tried to ease the financial pain of enrollment loss by providing aid to districts that lose students to charter schools. At the same time policy makers wonder why charter schools are not causing widespread school improvement.

We should not expect charter schools to inspire improvement if states continue to protect districts from competition. If we want charter schools to be a tool for district reform beyond just a handful of forward-thinking districts, it is time to level the financial playing field so that charters have access to decent facilities and an equal share of public funding. It's time to stop protecting school districts with arbitrary statewide caps.

It's also true however, that policy makers have one more obligation if the charter sector is to be taken seriously by more districts. Too many charter schools are mediocre and many are performing very badly. Lawmakers should insist that states and districts take performance oversight seriously and close down charter schools that are not effective. And they need to promote and replicate more high performing charter schools.

To close, then, the strategy of chartering is increasingly seen by school districts as an opportunity to create the schools they need. But that very promising strategy is unlikely to happen in more than a handful of urban districts until states commit to fair competition and performance-based accountability.