

Testimony of Nina Rees
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Madame Chairwoman and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to present the views of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools on how charter schools are promoting opportunity for America's students.

One of the most uplifting aspects of my job is being able to visit charter schools across America. Charter schools are public schools. They are open to all students, with no admission requirements and no tuition. They are diverse in every sense—serving children from every background and ability level; located in cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas; and offering a variety of school models that make education dynamic for students who learn in many different ways.

I have visited schools in which students are using the latest educational technology to move forward at their own pace ... schools in which students who once struggled to master fundamental concepts are getting the extra help they need to reach and surpass their grade level ... schools in which students are focused on the STEM fields, or the arts, or social justice ... schools in which lessons go beyond the classroom's walls to farm fields, city streets, or local businesses.

Two weeks ago, I visited DREAM Charter School in New York City. The school was organized by community leaders who saw that the children in their neighborhood needed access to healthy activities. It began as an athletic program on two baseball diamonds. It grew into an after-school and summer enrichment program. And finally, realizing that they could have their biggest impact during school hours, the founders started a charter school. Today, DREAM Charter School serves about 650 students. Twenty-seven percent of these students have special needs—higher than the citywide average of 21 percent. DREAM's students outperform city peers and district peers on both English Language Arts and math exams.

Every charter school has its own story and its own focus. But there are common elements to all the stories. School founders who saw a need in a local community. Parents who had grown frustrated by district schools that weren't meeting their children's needs. Children who enrolled in their charter school and flourished. And communities that are grateful to have these options.

The Charter Schools Program has expanded access to charter schools

The history of the charter school movement is one of steady growth and consistent bipartisan support. Presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump have all supported charter schools. Leaders of the House on both sides of the aisle have supported the growth of charter schools and specifically the Charter Schools Program, which has been essential to expanding access to charter schools across 43 states. We are especially grateful to Chairwoman Foxx and the current members of the Committee for the role you played in modernizing the program through the Every Student Succeeds Act.

The newly reauthorized Charter Schools Program creates opportunities for charter support organizations and statewide authorizers to administer state grants, dedicates additional resources to helping states to strengthen authorizing, and creates grants for the replication and expansion of high-

quality charter schools. Additionally, recent funding increases, including those appropriated for FY 2017 and FY 2018, will help support the creation of hundreds of additional charter schools serving thousands of students and will provide sorely needed assistance to improve charter school facilities. The National Alliance and the entire public charter school community are grateful that the Congress responded to the successes of charter schools, the unmet demand by families for spaces in high-performing charter schools, and our continuing facilities needs. Families across this country could not be more appreciative.

Since beginning with only a handful of schools in the early 1990s, the charter school sector has grown to encompass more than 7,000 schools serving nearly 3.2 million students today. Between the fall of 2016 and the fall of 2017, more than 300 new charter schools opened across the country, and total enrollment grew by more than 150,000 students. Charter schools now educate 6 percent of K-12 students nationally, with much higher percentages in some communities. Charter schools offer a wide range of programs and curricula, and in particular provide new options to students and families who otherwise might be trapped in lower-performing schools. In a growing number of school districts, charter schools account for a very significant percentage of total enrollment; in the 2016-2017 school year, charter schools enrolled at least 10 percent of students in 208 districts and in 19 districts the proportion goes up to at least 30 percent of students. Charter schools are also more likely than other public schools to enroll students of color, as well as students from low-income families. Simply put, there is no way to view public education today without acknowledging the tremendous contributions charter schools are making to public education.

Evidence of charter school quality continues to grow

Over its 26-year history, the charter school movement has been a leader in innovation, school choice, and education reform. Our schools have led efforts to eliminate achievement gaps, boost graduation rates, and revitalize communities. There is compelling evidence that charter schools are effective. Specifically, a 2015 study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, covering 41 urban communities in 22 States, found that:

- Students in urban charter schools gained 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days in reading per year, compared to their peers in non-charter public schools.
- Four or more years of enrollment in an urban charter school resulted in 108 days of additional learning in math and 72 additional days in reading, again compared to traditional public schools.
- In urban charter schools, low-income Hispanic students gained 48 additional days of learning per year in math and 25 additional days in reading, while low-income Black students gained 59 additional days in math and 44 days in reading. Moreover, Hispanic students who were identified as English learners gained 79 additional days in math and 72 in reading.

Other studies, typically looking at a more limited number of schools and students, have also reported very positive findings, including a higher propensity for charter school graduates to attend college, and higher earnings for charter school graduates after high school. Recent research in New York City has also found that the presence of a charter school in a neighborhood can lead to stronger performance at other nearby public schools.

Charter schools deliver on the promise of high-quality public education for all

Charter schools have unquestionably brought better educational opportunities to students who were denied them for too long. Where charter schools are available, students no longer have their academic

options limited by their zip code. And a growing number of charter schools are making diversity an essential part of their design, alongside academic excellence.

Some of the best-known of these diverse-by-design charter schools are DSST Public Schools in Denver. DSST serves 5,300 students across 13 schools. These STEM-focused schools are open-enrollment, not magnet schools, and their mission is to eradicate educational inequity by preparing students from every background for success in the 21st century. Over the past decade, 100 percent of DSST graduates have earned acceptance into 4-year colleges and universities.

DSST has succeeded because visionary school founders and dedicated teachers have made the school a sought-after choice for families throughout Denver. It has also succeeded because the local school district has embraced DSST as a partner in its effort to provide a high-quality education to all students. While many school districts across the country have viewed charter schools with distrust, Denver has been a model of district-charter collaboration. In Denver and a handful of other cities—San Antonio, Indianapolis—local leaders have focused less on what *kind* of public school students attend, and instead on making high-quality public school options accessible to as many students as possible.

This is precisely why inspired individuals began creating charter schools more than 25 years ago—to reinvigorate public education with new ideas for learning, empowering educators to take what they saw working and expand it to serve more students. If you ask any charter school leader in America to share what works in their school, they will be happy to do so. They'll even tell you what's not working. The charter school movement strives to keep making public education better for all students, pursuing innovation, sharing what we know, and learning from others who have wisdom to share.

Charter schools thrive where they have the freedom to innovate, to be flexible, to pursue diverse ways of teaching, and to respond to the needs of students rather than the mandates of bureaucracies. And charter schools thrive where they are held to high standards. Accountability is a central value of charter schools, and the National Alliance has taken a leadership role in promoting quality throughout the sector and improving shortcomings where they exist. We know that for public school choice to be truly meaningful, public school choices must be high-quality. In addition to being answerable to policymakers and authorizers, charter schools are also held accountable to parents. As schools of choice, charter schools must continuously earn the confidence of parents and caregivers who want the best for their children.

The challenge of meeting parental demand for charter schools

Charter schools work hard to engage parents, always recognizing that the most effective recruitment strategy is the success of our students and graduates. Recent surveys indicate that an estimated 4.8 to 5.3 million additional students would attend a charter school if space were available in a convenient location. That means millions of American families are now settling for schools that are less than what they want for their children. And far too many of these students are stuck in schools so dreadful that members of this Committee would not accept them as adequate for their own children or grandchildren.

The need for more charter school options is particularly acute in rural areas and tribal lands. But even in our largest cities, where charter schools have their largest presence, some neighborhoods have no access to charter schools.

The limited availability and high cost of appropriate school facilities continues to constrain the growth of our schools. Charter schools often do not have access to the funding sources that support the facilities needs of district public schools, such as municipal bonds, local property tax revenues, and State school facilities programs. Charter schools very often must meet their facilities needs using funds that would otherwise support their academic programs. It's a situation that requires urgent and immediate attention.

The National Alliance is advocating for a comprehensive national strategy for solving charter schools' facilities needs, including enactment of more State laws ensuring charter schools' access to adequate facilities and, at the Federal level, creation of tax incentives and other mechanisms that make it easier for more charter schools to access facilities funding—especially independent charter schools and charter schools in rural areas. In the meantime, the limited facilities funding provided through the CSP—specifically, through the Credit Enhancement program and the State Facilities Incentive Grants program—is extremely important.

Conclusion

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools takes pride in the accomplishments of public charter schools throughout America. More and more families now see charter schools as the best option for their children, and more and more States and local school districts recognize that charter schools are a vital element of the public educational landscape. While there is, of course, great variation in educational achievement and other outcomes across our schools (just as there is among public schools in general), we now have data demonstrating the success of charter schools in urban settings and elsewhere. Yet the charter school movement still faces major challenges, in meeting the demands for seats in our schools and ensuring that all charter schools have appropriate facilities, as well as in ensuring that poor performing schools close.

Every charter school has a story. And the collective story of charter schools is one of opportunity, innovation, and choice for millions of American families. Wherever they are available, charter schools are renewing the promise of public schooling in America. We appreciate the Committee's support for public school options, and we urge you to do all you can to make charter schools accessible to the many more students who want and need them.