

**Testimony of Nina Rees
President and CEO, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
Submitted to the House Appropriations Committee/
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education
April 29, 2015**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to present the views of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (National Alliance) regarding significantly increasing fiscal year 2016 appropriations for the Charter Schools Program at the U.S. Department of Education to \$375 million. The National Alliance is the leading national organization committed to advancing the quality, growth, and sustainability of public charter schools. In what continues to be a very tight fiscal environment, with sequestration caps still in place and many urgent needs and priorities competing for Federal support, the National Alliance appreciates the bipartisan work that Congress has done to help meet the needs of the burgeoning and successful charter schools movement. We truly appreciate the bipartisan support that public charter schools have received, including the increase for the Charter Schools Program (CSP) in the final 2015 appropriation and the additional increase included in the President's 2016 budget request. Thank you for this opportunity to describe the growth of the charter school movement, the successful student outcomes achieved by charter schools, and the reasons why we believe it would be appropriate—even urgent—for the CSP to receive a significant appropriations increase for 2016.

The Growth and Performance of Public Charter Schools

In the 2014-2015 school year, nearly 3 million children are attending more than 6,700 public charter schools in 43 states and the District of Columbia. Most recently, Oklahoma passed a law in April 2015 to expand charter schools throughout the state significantly, and we anticipate the

Governor will be signing it very soon. In March, Alabama authorized charter schools for the first time, becoming the 43rd state with a charter school law. The growth in the charter movement during the 23 years since the first school opened in 1992 has been absolutely phenomenal. Public charter schools are now a significant presence (more than 10 percent of enrollment) in some 150 communities, and enroll more than 30 percent of students in twelve school districts. Charter schools have become a prominent component of the public school landscape in many communities because they offer students and parents high-quality educational options, have the flexibility to adopt innovative curricula and practices, and are held accountable for their performance. Charter schools often address particular themes or instructional areas, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), performing arts, language immersion, project-based learning, Native American tribal language and cultures.

Charter schools have also been at the forefront of serving disadvantaged and other special-needs populations since the movement began. Nationally, public charter schools enroll higher percentages of minority students and students from low-income families than do traditional public schools (and particularly high percentages in certain communities, such as New York City), and their enrollment of English language learners and students with disabilities is comparable to that of other schools.

Through their agreements with authorized public chartering agencies, charter schools are held accountable for results, and the penalty for repeated failure to educate students to state standards is closure. The data show that this model—greater flexibility in exchange for

accountability for student outcomes—is working. A 2015 review of 2006-07 through 2011-12 data by the Center for Research on Outcomes in Education at Stanford University found that charter school students are outperforming their peers in traditional public schools and closing the achievement gaps between student subgroups. Nearly half (43 percent) of urban charter schools post larger learning gains than traditional public schools in math. In reading, 38 percent of charter schools outperform traditional school peers, while 46 percent show equivalent learning gains. The academic gains charter students received equated to 40 additional learning days in math and 28 additional days in reading relative to their peers in traditional public schools.

These results are especially impressive for students from specific demographic backgrounds: black students from low-income families enrolled in charter schools gained 59 instructional days in math and 44 days in reading compared to their peers. Hispanic English language learners gained 72 days in math and 79 days in reading by attending a public charter school. Students with special needs showed learning gains equivalent to nine additional instructional days in math and 13 in reading.

The Need for Additional Resources

Although the number of charter schools has increased rapidly, the movement has not been able to expand quickly enough to meet strong parent and student demand. Last year, the National Alliance found that there were more than a million names on charter school waiting lists nationally in school year 2013-2014. Accounting for the fact that many students apply to more than one school, we estimated that more than 586,000 students wanted to attend a charter school but could not do so simply because there were not enough spaces. The number of

names on the waiting lists has grown annually: from 2008-2009 through 2013-2014 it increased by a staggering 186 percent. The message is clear—there is a great unmet demand for seats in charter schools, and public officials at all levels should be doing more to meet that demand.

Toward that end, I cannot overemphasize the importance of federal support, through the CSP, in helping charter schools get started and in enabling the replication and expansion of successful charter school models. Unfortunately, while 43 states and DC now have charter school laws, states and localities have underfunded their charter schools (relative to traditional public schools) and have not provided the seed money needed to plan and start new schools. It is inconceivable that the movement would have grown as quickly as it did without the CSP, particularly through the State Educational Agency (SEA) grants. And in recent years, the Replication and Expansion grants have been an essential tool for enabling our most effective models and schools to serve additional students, often in economically distressed areas where traditional public schools are failing.

Facilities are another area in which federal support is critical. State and local formulas and programs often do not provide charter schools with the same support for capital expenses as is available to traditional schools. In those cases, charter school operators typically have to scramble to find acceptable facilities. The CSP State Facilities Incentive Grants and the Credit Enhancement for Charter Schools program help to make up the difference. We look forward to working with the Committee on ensuring that both of these grant programs are meeting the needs of the charter school community.

The Fiscal Year 2016 Budget

As the Subcommittee begins its work on the appropriation for 2016, I encourage you to make funding for the CSP a key priority. As I have described, the nation needs more schools that can effectively serve diverse populations, particularly in neighborhoods that have not had high-quality options. And we must do more to meet the needs of parents and students who want charter schools but cannot gain access to them.

The National Alliance is pleased that the Administration's budget request includes \$375 million for the program, of which at least \$100 million would go for Replication and Expansion Grants, up to \$10 million for State Facilities Incentive Grants, at least \$13 million for Credit Enhancement, at least \$11 million for National Activities, and the remainder for Grants to SEAs and the "non-SEA" competition. We commend the Administration for including \$375 million for CSP in the budget request and ask that Congress support these funding levels for these important programs to ensure sufficient funding to open new charter schools in as many states as possible. In addition, we look forward to discussing our recommendations for bill and report language to support expanding access of students in failing schools to high-quality charter schools, authorizer and charter school quality, and other issues related to the program.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the National Alliance and the charter school community on the fiscal year 2016 appropriations. If my organization can be of any assistance to the Subcommittee, please do not hesitate to contact me.