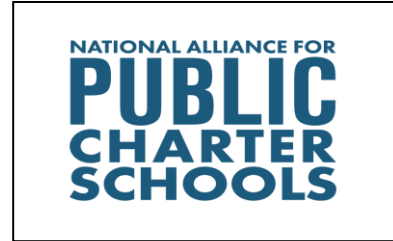


Testimony of Starlee Coleman

President & CEO,
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
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Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro and

Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to be here today to discuss federal funding for America’s schools. I am Starlee Coleman the President & CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. We lead a diverse coalition of organizations, schools, teachers, and families in advocating at the federal and state levels for policies that treat public charter schools, their teachers and staff, and families fairly and protect the right of families to choose the public schools that best meet their children’s needs.

Across the nation more than 8,150 public charter schools serve a diverse student body of 3.7 million students—8 percent of America’s public-school students. Forty-six states have passed legislation allowing charter schools to open. Over the last five years, public charter enrollment has grown 12 percent, while district student enrollment has declined. More than 60 percent of charter school students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and more than 70 percent are students of color—both higher percentages than in district schools.

And charter schools are delivering results. In 2024, the Fordham Institute and the Progressive Policy Institute both found that when charter schools open, students in traditional public schools also thrive. Their research shows that students in both charter

and traditional public schools perform better in reading and math in communities where charter schools exist. This is true for both urban and rural communities.

Today's hearing is about the role and impact of federal funding in K-12 education. Federal funding can be a powerful tool to advance good policy. But funding alone cannot overcome bad policy.

There is currently one program in the entire federal budget dedicated to advancing school choice across the country and that is the federal Charter School Program. The modest federal investment - \$440 million a year; less than 1% percent of federal education spending – in this program provides start-up funds for new charter schools until state funding kicks in when students arrive on campus. The CSP also provides funding to help charter schools pay for school buildings because in most states, state and local funding for buildings is not available to charters. Nearly half of the charter schools educating students today have received CSP funds. And while the CSP doesn't come close to covering all charter school start up or facilities costs or needs, it is a catalyst for advancing one of the most successful, bipartisan, and in-demand education reforms in American public education history.

While charter schools have become part of the fabric of American urban education, it's important for you to know that suburban and rural charter growth is surging. The CSP is vital to our ability to meet parent demand for public school options in these communities, too. A CSP grant in Idaho is seeding the growth of charter schools founded and run by retired military leaders that include an Air Force Colonel, an Army Major, a Marine Corp

Major, and an Army Lieutenant Colonel. In Texas, several classical model charter schools have enrollment waitlists numbering in the thousands and a CSP grant is helping those schools open more campuses. In Alabama, the CSP provided start-up funds for the Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School in Bessemer.

The CSP is the way for you to show parents in all states and communities - red and blue, urban and not - that you are listening and are investing federal funds in programs ***they want and that work.***

At the same time, we must be honest about what federal funds alone cannot do -- and that is overcome bad policy or practices at the state and local level.

Public schools – district and charter – are coming off historic budget highs and no reasonable person can look at the most recent results on the Nation’s Report Card and draw the conclusion that all we need is more money.

More money alone will not improve student outcomes. If schools are using unsound instructional practices, money won’t help. And, making changes to move to sound practices takes money. It takes money to provide new professional development to teachers in the science of reading. It takes money to buy new curriculum and instructional materials. It takes money to provide small group, high dosage tutoring to students who are behind and need to catch up.

More money alone will not keep teachers in the classroom. If state and local policies invite chaos in the classroom, make teachers spend more time on paperwork than instruction, and micromanage every decision they make, money won’t help. But it does

take funding to implement outcomes-based teacher bonus programs. It takes funding to deploy tech tools that will streamline administrative work for teachers and school leaders. It takes funding to train teachers and administrators in student engagement practices that work.

Federal funding can be a powerful incentive to reform state and local policies so they result in better outcomes for children and keep our best teachers in the classroom. Many previous bipartisan legislative efforts demonstrate that using federal funding as a carrot for states and districts to implement thoughtful, student-focused policies can have an impact on student achievement. Indeed, the NAEP high water mark was 2017, which came after 15 years of consistent, but reasonable, federal pressure to improve student outcomes under both Republican and Democratic leadership.

And yet, you must strike a careful balance of not micromanaging states and schools. I acknowledge this may seem like a contradiction. Demand outcomes; but don't micromanage. Funding alone won't solve our problems; but we can't fix them without it. This is nuanced work that doesn't lend itself well to soundbites – but it's the needle you must thread.

Here are three guiding principles that might help as you think about future K-12 funding:

1. **Use federal funding to help support students most in need.** Students from low-income families and students with disabilities come into our schools with challenges that take time and resources to address. Ensuring that these students –

especially in low-wealth states – have the resources they need to catch up with their more affluent peers is an appropriate role for federal funding.

2. **Use federal funding to expand proven and promising strategies to increase student learning.** There is a role for the federal government in K-12 education, but it's not to write a blank check. Federal funds can be used to lift up state and local proven and promising practices that are accelerating student learning and help support their replication.
3. **Use federal funding to show parents you are listening to their demand for school options.** The days when parents were ok with whatever school the government assigned them based on where they live are over. Parents in low-income, urban communities with failing district schools are demanding options. Parents in affluent suburban communities with perfectly fine district schools are demanding options. Parents in rural communities where they haven't had a lot of options are demanding them now. The federal government can respond to parents by continuing to use its modest investment in the Charter School Program to ensure families in all states have access to school choices.

As a mom of a public-school student, I want to acknowledge that you have a tough job. It's hard to know how your decisions will trickle down to my little girl's elementary school in Austin, Texas. But they do. Moms like me are counting on you to thoughtfully balance the need for resources with the need for effective policies, and the need for as much of the decision-making as possible to stay close to the children being served.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.