

Written Statement of Kenneth Campbell, CEO of New Schools for Baton Rouge, before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education (Committee on Education and the Workforce)

Good morning.

Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Kenneth Campbell, and I am the CEO of New Schools for Baton Rouge, a non-profit initiative founded in 2012 by civic and community leaders to transform public education in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Our core belief is that every child deserves a great school, and our mission is to ensure that every child in Baton Rouge has access to an excellent public education.

I have spent the last 30 years advocating for and working with civic leaders, educators, and communities, at home and abroad, to develop and implement sound and impactful charter school policies and initiatives. In the 1990s, I helped shape the charter school law here in Washington, D.C., and worked with community leaders in launching the first charter schools in the area.

In 2007, I was tapped by the Louisiana Department of Education to serve as the founding director of the state charter school office and lead the state's efforts in rebuilding New Orleans' entire education system following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. We did it by empowering local educators with the necessary infrastructure and systems to operate their schools with the autonomy to make the best decisions for their teachers, students, and communities and giving local parents the power to choose the school that best fits their child's needs.

Before this transformation, New Orleans was the second-lowest performing school district in Louisiana, with a graduation rate of 54%. Recent studies now rank New Orleans, which is a 100% charter district, as the seventh best-performing school district in the top 200 large urban school districts in the United States, with a graduation rate of 80%.

Today, as CEO of New Schools for Baton Rouge, my energy and efforts are focused on utilizing charter schools to drive that same type of improvement and innovation in Baton Rouge. Our work with charters is centered around two questions. First, are charter schools serving students and families well? And second, are they accelerating learning for our most vulnerable children? The answer to both is a resounding yes.

As with most school districts nationwide, Baton Rouge schools have struggled to regain pre-COVID performance levels. In the state's most recent performance evaluation, just 38% of the district's traditional schools surpassed their 2019 scores. While charter schools have not been immune to the same struggles, the data revealed that Baton Rouge charter schools outpaced the district-run schools, with 67% surpassing their pre-pandemic scores.

In addition, 78% of charter schools in Baton Rouge increased their overall state performance score, while only 58% of district-run schools were able to do the same.

Our success in Baton Rouge is indicative of what is happening in charter schools nationwide, as you just heard in Dr. Raymod's testimony. This success is also driving greater demand. Little did we know that one little charter school launched in Minnesota in 1992 would launch a movement that is now 8,000 charter schools strong, serving more than 3.7 million students. In Louisiana, where we are celebrating 30 years of chartering, 147 charter schools serve more than 87,000 students in urban, rural, and suburban communities. In Baton Rouge, almost 30% of all students who attend a public school in our city attend a charter school. The power of choice is real. Parents want to choose the school that best fits their child's needs and interests, and charter schools provide that opportunity.

Contrary to what skeptics claimed would happen, charter schools are educating all children. In Baton Rouge, more than 90% of charter school students are students of color, and roughly 85% are economically disadvantaged. Further, charter schools in our state have not shied away from serving high-need student populations. Schools like Opportunities Academy in New Orleans, which provides a rigorous, full-day program for college-aged students with intellectual and developmental disabilities or Louisiana Key Academy, which specializes in serving students with dyslexia and operates three schools in our state, or the Emerge School for Autism, which was the first tuition-free school in the state for students with autism spectrum disorder.

In addition to providing engaging and individualized academic opportunities for families and students, charter schools also serve as catalysts for educational innovation. Belle Chasse Academy, just south of New Orleans, was the nation's first charter school on a military base and was founded to meet the unique needs of the military child. Two Baton Rouge charter schools, Baton Rouge Ochsner Discovery Health Sciences Academy and BASIS Materra, have partnered with local and regional healthcare systems, Ochsner Health and Woman's Hospital, to collaborate on academic resources and opportunities in STEM education, connecting classroom to career. GEO Next Generation High School partnered with Baton Rouge Community College to develop a dual enrollment program that puts students on track to graduate from high school with an associate degree. In 2023, GEO graduated its first class, with 50% of the students earning at least one year of college credit and 10% earning a complete associate degree.

Charter schools are not always successful. In fact, accountability is a cornerstone of the charter school model. Unlike traditional schools, when charter schools are not performing up to standards or expectations, their charter can be withdrawn, and the school is closed. While the decision to close any school is regrettable, it is integral to the success of charter schools. The ongoing commitment to evaluating and, when necessary,

redirecting resources to schools that better serve students' needs, showcases a dedication to fostering a robust and effective educational landscape.

Earlier in my remarks, I spoke about the growth of charter schools in Louisiana and across the country. And, while local leaders deserve the credit for the hard work of planning and launching schools, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the key role that resources provided through the federal Charter Schools Program have played in the growth and expansion of charter schools. The Charter Schools Program is the nation's only source of dedicated federal funding to support the creation, expansion, and replication of charter schools. For more than 25 years, the Charter School Program has provided resources to help ensure every child can access a high-quality public education, and those funds are essential to cover planning and start-up costs. Louisiana was recently awarded a \$55 million grant from this program, and our state superintendent is particularly excited about using those funds to create charter schools that serve our neediest children. We are deeply appreciative that Congress continues to allocate resources to the Charter School Program, and we hope that charter schools continue to enjoy strong bipartisan support as they work to accelerate learning gains across the country.

We are also grateful that Congresswomen Letlow and Tokuda have introduced a bipartisan bill, the *Empower Charter School Educators to Lead Act*, that would provide access to funding for educators and community leaders to help strengthen their charter school planning efforts and get the assistance they need to successfully complete the charter application. Also, Senators Cassidy and Bennet have introduced a bill, the *Equitable Access to School Facilities Act*, that would provide funding and financing for charter school facilities and make it easier for charter schools to get free access to public buildings. Both bills would help strengthen chartering. We also ask that you protect us from even more regulations from Washington that will make our work harder without benefiting students.

There is no question, our public education system is struggling. From decaying infrastructure and widening skill-level gaps to a lack of accountability and unmanageable bureaucratic school systems, too many of our public schools are failing our students, our families, and our communities. We must do something before it is too late.

Charter schools are not a magic cure. By themselves, they cannot be the end-all answer to what ails our public education system. But they are essential and crucial pieces in turning our public education system around and rapidly identifying and implementing alternatives that have the greatest impact on their students. They can provide viable options for families and students who want more from their public schools. They can empower families with the ability to choose the school that best fits their child's needs. They can engage communities with a sense of ownership, pride, and partnership. They can be important collaborators with school districts to develop programs and services that improve all public schools for all students.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. And thank you for recognizing the vital role charter schools can play in the education of our students and the future of our country .