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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE
COMMITTEE OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS**

“RAISING THE BAR: THE ROLE OF CHARTERS IN K-12 EDUCATION”

**By Kara Kerwin, President of The Center for Education Reform
March 4, 2014**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to share testimony on the role of charter schools in K-12 education. I bring to you a national perspective from The Center for Education Reform, which has worked for twenty years across the country to provide advice and counsel to lawmakers like yourselves as well as working with parents and grassroots groups to help them understand education reform efforts with a focus on growing access to educational options, specifically charter schools. My goal in providing this testimony is to highlight the great work charter schools have been doing across the United States, and to reinforce the need to accelerate the pace of reform by improving laws to meet the demand and serve the educational needs of families across the country.

Against the odds, and far too often in hostile policy environments, charters survive and succeed grounded in the principles of choice, accountability, and autonomy. They innovate and adjust to deliver results by introducing new curriculum or creating blended learning environments to meet student needs. Even when they are part of a larger network, no two charter schools are alike, providing diverse educational options from which parents and students may choose.

What began as a small experiment had grown to one that serves over 2.2 million students in 6,004 charter entities in the 2012-13 school year. By early 2013, 42 states and Washington, D.C., have enacted statutes authorizing charter schools. The total number of charters has increased over the last decade at an average rate of 340 schools per year. While this represents a solid achievement, growth will need to accelerate if charter schools are to meet the public demand for these schools.

Demand for charter schools unfortunately remains stronger than the supply, with the length of the average waiting list increasing from 233 students in 2009 to 277 in 2012 according to The Center’s recent 2014 *Survey of America’s Charter Schools*.

Contrary to the impression some have that charters “cream” more advantaged students from traditional public schools, a majority of charter school students are non-white, or

minority students. Charter schools serve a more disadvantaged student population, including more low-income and minority students. Sixty-one percent of charter schools serve a student population where over 60 percent qualify for the federal Free or Reduced Lunch Program due to their family's low income.

In addition, charter students are somewhat more likely to qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch due to being low-income (63 percent of charter students versus 48 percent of public school students), to being African-American (28 percent of charter students versus 16 percent of public school students) or to being Hispanic (28 percent of charter students versus 23 percent of public school students).

In addition to providing education for underserved students, charter schools emphasize strong, challenging academic programs. The most popular educational approach is college preparatory (30 percent), and a substantial number (8 percent) focus on the demanding Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) area.

Many charter schools have historically used their freedom in budgeting and staffing to increase student instructional time beyond the traditional public school six-and-a-half hour day and 180-day school year. From 2009 to 2012, there has been a further increase in the proportion of charter schools that expand instructional time, especially the school day. The percent of charter schools with an extended school year increased from 14 percent to 27 percent in those three years, while the percent with an extended school day increased 25 percentage points from 23 percent to 48 percent.

In states and cities across the country, charter school students demonstrate comparably high achievement rates on national and state assessments. I'd like to share with the members of this committee some data that shows the continued success of students in charter schools.

Dr. Caroline Hoxby, a researcher and professor at Stanford University has studied charter schools and their effects on student achievement for years, at a national, state and city level. In 2009, Dr. Hoxby looked at New York City charter school achievement compared to traditional public schools, using the gold standard of methodologies – random lottery-based – and found that by the time a charter school student has reached the end of eighth grade, he will be scoring about 30 points higher in math than he would have been scoring if he remained in the conventional public school system.

Washington, DC, where 43 percent of public school children are enrolled in charter schools, exemplifies how they can help improve student achievement, according to results from the most recent DC-CAS, the city's standardized test. On these tests, charter school students showed their highest proficiency rates yet, increasing by 3.9 percent from last year. They continue to perform above statewide averages in both reading and math.

The most important common element among states, such as D.C., Minnesota, New York, and Indiana, with the strongest charter schools are that their laws allow for the creation of

a system that allows for independent, multiple authorizers that hold charter schools accountable. In states with multiple and independent authorizers, stronger, more objective oversight is used to ensure that successful charter schools remain open and those that fail to perform are closed.

Indiana has one of the strongest charter school laws in the nation and continuously receives an 'A' based on our 18 years of analyses and rankings of *Charter School Laws Across the States*. Today, Ball State University leads the pack in authorizing nearly half of the states charter schools. The Mayor of Indianapolis and a newly formed state charter school board may also authorize and oversee charter schools.

Authorizers other than local school boards have granted over 60 percent of charters across the country. Continuing to improve charter school laws across the country to ensure higher accountability and therefore, higher quality schools, is a cornerstone of The Center for Education Reform's mission.

There is one major obstacle facing America's charter schools nationwide, that I'd like to raise with the committee. That obstacle is funding inequity. Since charter schools are public schools, students attending them should be entitled to the same funding as students in traditional public schools. However, only a handful of states fund charters in a manner that approaches equity with other public schools. Even many states with otherwise strong charter laws typically fail in this regard. Based on our research, charters are funded at approximately 64 percent of their district counterparts, averaging \$7,131 per pupil compared to the average per pupil expenditure of \$11,184 in the traditional public schools in 2009/10. They also generally do not receive facilities funds, unlike other public schools, and have to use significant parts of their operational budget to pay for rent.

More than two decades after the first charter law was passed in Minnesota, the number of charter schools continues to increase each year at a steady but slow pace, while still remaining a small percentage of the total number of America's public schools. While gains in parent empowerment are being made, only rarely do state officials view charter schools or other choice policies as the core strategy of reform. One-size-fits-all policies intended to impact all students or all teachers in a state--whether it be standards and testing or teacher evaluation--continue to be perceived as the main attraction, often engendering fierce debates. Yet improvement in U.S. student achievement on the National Assessment (NAEP) is minimal and American students are not closing the gap with our top international competitors.

It is time to ignite the growth of charter schools and other schools of choice and recognize that real reform does not happen as a result of compliance with federal regulations or state-wide policies, but school by school and classroom by classroom. It occurs when educators work with parents at the local level to create, refine and maintain high-achieving academic institutions that meet the needs of their students. Current charter policies artificially constrain growth and deter investment. Charters are typically granted for a limited number of students, with no guarantee or even presumption that effective

schools with long waiting lists will be permitted to expand. Expansion to diverse locations in the same state may require approval of additional, separate charters through the full, cumbersome process. Extraneous, sometimes political considerations can come into play in the approval of new charters, adding a high degree of unpredictability.

I want to close by sharing the stories of two young men I met recently who epitomize the positive effect a charter school can play in the lives of students. High school students Danial and Jay attend a Friendship Public Charter School here in the District of Columbia, and are clear examples of students who are making the most of their better-for-them schooling option. Collectively, these two high schoolers have earned enough college credits to be halfway through a bachelor's program by now. And their favorite thing about their school of choice is the rigorous computer science program the school offers.

Millions of students across the country are vying for the opportunities afforded to Danial and Jay by making a choice in a charter school. We must accelerate growth and we cannot wait any longer. We must fight back efforts to overregulate or fit the charter school movement into a one-size-fits all policy box. Only with laws that ensure parental choice, accountability, autonomy for educators and schools to innovate, and fiscal equity for both students and schools can we meet the critical challenge to improve outcomes for America's students.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony to you.

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