



**Submitted Testimony from Janeene Freeman, CEO of the
Northeast Charter Schools Network
for the Joint Budget Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education
February 14, 2017**

Senator Young, Assemblyman Farrell, and other distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the Elementary and Secondary Education budget. My name is Janeene Freeman, CEO of the Northeast Charter Schools Network (formerly the New York Charter Schools Association). We are a statewide advocacy and support organization for the more than 260 charters in New York State. These charter schools employ an estimated 14,000 professional staff, including more than 10,000 teachers who serve approximately 130,000 students throughout the state. As the state membership association representing charter schools both large and small, independent and network-managed, we have unique insight to offer about public charter schools here in the Empire State.

NECSN supports the charter-specific proposals Governor Cuomo advanced in the Executive Budget release, both those related to funding and those related to charter school growth.

First, the proposal includes no new changes to the way charter school operating funds are calculated, which results in a return to the original funding formula included in the *Charter Schools Act of 1998*. For the first dozen years of the charter school movement in New York this formula typically ran as planned, but over the last few years it has either been frozen or held to modest increases. The deviation from the formula was necessary while the economy struggled to recover from the Great Recession. But we agree with the Governor that now is the time to return to this formula, and would like to point out that this return has been planned and reflected in the statute for years. Gaps will remain between what district students receive and what charter students receive, but nevertheless we are thankful for the proposal and consider it a positive step in the right direction.

Finding and affording a building continues to be the most difficult challenge public charter schools face. Charters do not receive access to the state building aid program, and do not have access to district school space outside of New York City. It is imperative that we remove this obstacle so more new charter schools can open their doors and help serve the children seeking another option. This year, an estimated 5,000 children are on wait lists just in Buffalo and Rochester alone. The “cap” in these cities is not one that restricts the number of new charters that can be granted, but rather is a default financial cap because of infrastructure challenges.

In a second move related to charter school funding, the Governor has proposed technical improvements to the rental assistance currently provided to new or growing schools located in New York City. These improvements are thoughtful policy and we are supportive. We urge you, however, to consider expanding this rental assistance program to include all charter schools around the state regardless of age or location. Right now, charter schools in places like Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Long Island, and Albany struggle to pay their facilities costs with their operating funding, which takes already scarce dollars out of the classroom. Furthermore, some of New York City's oldest and most successful charters do not receive assistance either.

Finally, the Governor has proposed eliminating the geographic sub-cap on the issuance of new charter schools in New York City. We are happy to support this proposal because we do not believe there should ever be caps on the number of great, high-quality public school seats that can be made available. The overall statewide cap of 460 charter schools will remain in place, with the ability to reissue charters for the schools that close. We embrace outcomes-based accountability as a core principle, and we therefore support closures when charter schools do not live up to their promises. But we also believe when a school closes it is important to allow another option to fill that space, so granting the ability to reissue charters is a smart policy improvement.

Charter schools are a lifeline for so many children, and have become an integral part of the public education system here in New York. We are thrilled with Governor Cuomo's support in his 2017 proposal and remain hopeful and confident the Senate and Assembly will remember our families while crafting the final budget package. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment and for your consideration of our perspective.