



**Todd Ziebarth, Vice President, State Advocacy and Support,  
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Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and  
Secondary Education  
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Good morning Chairman Hunter and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address the Subcommittee today as it discusses how states are expanding parent and student educational options.

My name is Todd Ziebarth. I am the Vice President of State Advocacy and Support at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. The National Alliance is a nonprofit organization working to grow the number of high-quality public charter schools available to all families, especially those who currently don't have access to good public schools. The National Alliance develops and advocates for improved public policies, provides assistance to state charter school associations and resource centers, and serves as the united voice for this large and diverse movement.

Currently, 41 states and the District of Columbia have charter laws on the books. There are more than 5,600 charters open, serving over two million students. Annual growth in the public charter school movement is strong, with 400 to 500 new charters opening each year and 150,000 to 200,000 new students enrolling in charters each year. At the same time we're seeing such robust growth, we know there is still a significant demand not being met, as over 400,000 students remain on charter waiting lists across the country.

One of the major reasons that we're seeing such healthy growth in the public charter school movement is that many states are significantly strengthening their charter laws in three major areas.

First, states are lifting their caps on charter growth – either partially or entirely. Over the past two years, 12 states have done so. Most notably, North Carolina eliminated its cap of 100 charter schools, Michigan phased out its cap on the number of charter schools that can be approved by public universities, and Indiana and Wisconsin removed their limits on virtual charter enrollment.

Second, states are taking steps to provide more equitable charter school funding and facilities support, which is especially critical given that charter students only receive 75% of the funding that their traditional public school counterparts get. Over the past two years, 12 states have done so. Of particular note, Indiana enacted legislation that creates a charter school facilities assistance program to make grants and loans to charter schools, appropriates \$17 million to this program, and requires school districts to make vacant space available to public charter schools to lease for \$1 a year or to buy for \$1. Also, Texas enacted a law that allows state-authorized charter schools that have an investment grade rating and meet certain financial criteria to apply to have their bonds guaranteed by the Permanent School Fund.

Third, states are strengthening their authorizing environments to improve charter accountability. Over the past two years, 13 states have done so. Most significantly, four states created new statewide charter boards, while Hawaii, New Mexico, and

Rhode Island passed major quality control measures setting the stage for the future growth of high-quality public charter schools in these states.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the progress in the three areas of caps, funding and facilities support, and authorizing, we are seeing increasingly strong efforts to finally enact charter laws in the states that still don't have them. In fact, Maine enacted a charter law in 2011, becoming the 42<sup>nd</sup> jurisdiction that allows this innovative public school option. In the remaining nine states that have not yet enacted charter laws, there is growing momentum to finally do so in Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, and Washington.

As states have expanded public charter schools through the actions I've discussed, public charter schools have, in turn, expanded the ways in which public education engages parents in several ways.<sup>2</sup>

First and foremost, charters have empowered parents to choose new public school options. Now some parents, usually those of means, already have plenty of options. What's unique about charters is that they've provided thousands of public school options to parents without means, as 52% of charter students qualify for free and reduced price lunch (vs. 45% in traditional public schools). Many of these parents have had very limited options – if any – until now.

Charters have also created new kinds of partnership with parents. At KIPP charter schools, for example, parents (as well as students and teachers) sign a learning

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<sup>1</sup> By "quality control measures," we mean the following provisions: transparent charter application, review, and decision-making processes; performance-based charter contracts; comprehensive charter school monitoring and data collection processes; and, clear processes for renewal, nonrenewal, and revocation decisions.

<sup>2</sup> A primary resource for this testimony's comments on parent engagement is *Parent Involvement in Urban Charter Schools: A New Paradigm or the Status Quo?* by Joanna Smith and Priscilla Wohlstetter, October 2009 - [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/papers/Smith%20-Wohlstetter\\_COMPLETE.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/papers/Smith%20-Wohlstetter_COMPLETE.pdf)

pledge called the "Commitment to Excellence," which ensures that all parties will do whatever it takes to help the student learn. Example items from the Commitment include:

- We will make sure our child arrives at KIPP every day by 7:25 a.m. (Monday-Friday) or boards a KIPP bus at the scheduled time.
- We will always help our child in the best way we know how and we will do whatever it takes for him/her to learn. This also means that we will check our child's homework every night, let him/her call the teacher if there is a problem with the homework, and try to read with him/her every night.<sup>3</sup>

The Commitment and other similar agreements can serve as effective tools for schools to use as they establish expectations about the school and manage parent engagement in the school.

In addition to such agreements, charters partner with parents in other unique ways, most notably by involving them in the decision-making and governance of the school. In some cases, parents serve as members of the charter school's governing board, playing a role in school-level governance not available to parents in a traditional district environment, in which one central school board makes policy decisions for all of the schools in the district. This type of school-level governance is mandated by law in six states, and utilized by choice in individual charter schools in many other states.

Charters also engage parents by providing them services. For example, one charter school runs an employment office for parents, focusing on job opportunities for refugee parents with limited English skills. In addition to direct service provision, some

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<sup>3</sup> To see a sample Commitment to Excellent from KIPP, see [http://www.kipp.org/files/dmfile/KIPP\\_Commitment\\_to\\_Excellence\\_Sample.pdf](http://www.kipp.org/files/dmfile/KIPP_Commitment_to_Excellence_Sample.pdf)

schools offer GED, English-language, college-credit, and parenting classes for parents after hours.

Another way that charters engage parents is by conducting parent surveys to identify what activities parents would be willing to help out with and what skills they had that might benefit the school. Schools then use this information when they are looking to engage parents in specific activities.

In conclusion, we are encouraged that many states are significantly strengthening their charter laws to support high-quality public charter school growth. These schools will not only provide more options to parents and students, but they will also serve as laboratories of innovation to positively influence the larger traditional public school system.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.