

Comments before the Senate Select Committee on K-12 Funding
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The South Carolina Public Charter School District began its third year of operation this year with a student enrollment of approximately 8,000 students in eleven schools. Three new public charter schools opened this year and the district's student population increased by over 1,500 students. The three new schools in the district are all brick and mortar schools. They are located in York County, Charleston County, and Florence County.

The growth in the district has occurred in spite of a funding level that cannot sustain the district long-term. Even with categorical funding from state and federal funds, and the \$700 legislative proviso, the district is funded at approximately \$3,500 per student. I have attached an article from the district's recent quarterly newsletter. The article documents, using data from the US Department of Education, the finding that the South Carolina Public Charter School District is the lowest funded public school district in the United States.

The district has never asked for equal funding with traditional districts in the state which would put us at approximately the \$9,000 per student level. We appreciate the fact that we have some flexibility from regulations and have used this to reduce our expenses. We are, however, public schools. A sustainable level of funding near \$6,000 is fair and it is time for legislators to accept responsibility for the district that was created by legislative action. The district needs a level of funding that allows us to maintain some degree of survivability. If any traditional public school district was funded at the level we receive there would be an outcry because of the obvious discrimination.

Politicians and educators from across the state have expressed support for choice programs and the district's enrollment proves that parents have bought into the concept of choice. The expectations for parent choice have grown substantially and will continue to grow. Many parents are willing to give up some extracurricular and educational refinements to send their children to programs like charter schools that provide options to traditional programs. It is not acceptable to ask these parents to give up any hope of a sustainable choice program by keeping the level of funding at the very bottom of public school funding in this country.

Let me give you an example of what is happening in the public charter school world. A new public charter school just opened in Lake City in Florence County. Over 200 students are in this school that teaches standards through the arts. Lake City Charter School students' support drops from approximately \$9,000 dollars per student in Florence School District Three to less than \$4,000 per student in the South Carolina Public Charter School District. These students are taught state standards; they take the same required state assessments, and have the same AYP requirements. Is it fair to take away more than half of the per student funding when a student moves less than half a mile to a state authorized public school choice program?

(Dr. Wayne Brazell, Cont'd.)

Charter schools are not “the only answer” to improving public education in South Carolina, but with some degree of parity in funding the charter school movement can provide a degree of innovation and choice not currently available to all parents in public schools. This opportunity for choice will be especially helpful in our rural districts. If we can reach a funding level of near \$6,000, the charter school movement in South Carolina will grow and within two years the South Carolina Public Charter School District will be a top fifteen school district in terms of enrollment.

The South Carolina Public Charter School District is relatively new and we are having some of the growing pains you would expect. We have, however, been crystal clear to all of the district schools that we have high expectations for academic success and we will not accept excuses. The Board of Trustees in the District has said over and over that if charter schools in the district do not perform well academically they will be forced to close. This does not happen in traditional districts. One of our charter schools is on probation now and has been given until the next testing cycle to improve their academic performance or their charter will not be renewed. There is no misunderstanding on the part of the charter schools in the South Carolina Public Charter School District; we demand a high level of academic performance from our schools. You will see that as we mature as a district and our schools have a chance to work in our system there will be continued improvement in academic performance. We can do this at a funding level that will prove to be real deal for the state. We are asking for a realistic level of funding to give us a chance to continue to stress academics without worrying about closing schools.

We will work hand and hand with the state to keep our funding reasonable. Our parents and employees are working hard to keep us afloat by helping out at schools, conducting every type of fund raiser you can imagine, writing grants, working with foundations, and taking advantage of our charter school status to reduce costs.

Let me close by saying that I am excited about the possibility of the charter school movement in South Carolina and I think in the next few years there will be a degree of acceptance on behalf of the traditional districts. Public charter schools as a choice program are not going away unless the folks who created the district turn their back on the possibility of changing the status quo. In the next few months you will hear about the possibility of a world class science and engineering school opening as a charter school in South Carolina in 2012 and there will be other announcements relative to new high quality charter schools in the state. These positive educational events will continue to happen in South Carolina with just a little help from our friends and a little less animosity toward our public charter school students from those who do not want to change the educational status quo.

(Dr. Wayne Brazell, Cont'd)

South Carolina Public Charter School District Lowest Funded District in the United States

The U. S. Department of Education houses the National Center for Education Statistics. That federal office maintains a comprehensive data base, which can be used for researching districts across the nation. The data base offers some interesting information. For example, there are about 15,000 public school districts in the United States plus a large number of special districts that consist of one school in a peculiar setting, such as a high school in a state prison or a school for individuals with severe disabilities. The 15,000 districts with more than one school range in size from a few hundred students to nearly one million students. The data base includes district financial information for many past years. The National Center for Education Statistics also publishes dozens of reports and white papers each year on national trends and other topics.

A recent study conducted by Program Officer Frank Johnson of the Center shows conclusively that public charter schools have the highest family poverty rate per student in the nation, especially in urban centers and especially in the South. The report also states that for 2007-2008, the *lowest funded 5%* of all **non-charter public schools** in the nation averaged \$6,806 per student per year. The *lowest funded 5%* of all **public charter schools** in the nation averaged \$4,600 per student per year.

In contrast, most studies by various groups show that the average district in America with more than one school spends about \$10,750 per student per year. The one-school districts (usually public charter schools) often run on less than half of that.

In 1996, the lowest funded school district in the nation with more than one school was in Mississippi. It operated on \$4,029 per student per year. In 2004, Utah had the lowest total average of funding per student per year with \$4,950. The funding variance between the Utah districts was small, so the poorest district in Utah operated on about \$4,300 or so per student in 2004. For 2005-2006, Western Placer Unified School District in Lincoln, CA operated by way of \$4,444 per student per year, which was the lowest in the nation at that time.

The lowest funded district in the nation in 2006-2007 with more than one school was Preston Joint District in Idaho, which operated two elementary schools on \$5,896 per student per year.

By comparison, the South Carolina Public Charter School District currently operates on less than an average of \$3,500 per student per year.

On average in the U. S., local funding amounts to 40% of all revenue for districts. State funding provides another 50% and federal funding about 10%. In South Carolina, the average is about 45%, 45%, and 10%. However, since the South Carolina Public Charter School District does not receive local funding, it is the lowest funded school district in the nation that has more than one school.

Clay Eaton, Editor

Dir. of Special Programs

South Carolina Public Charter School District