

**TESTIMONY OF EDUCATION LAW CENTER
BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ON A4177**

June 10, 2013

Thank you, Assemblyman Diegnan and members of the Assembly Education Committee, for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of Education Law Center (ELC) about the recently introduced bill to update and improve New Jersey's charter school law.

Because charter schools are public schools, ELC has always sought to promote high quality educational opportunities for students enrolled in these schools. We have also advocated for ensuring that charter schools are equitable and effective and contribute to the overall improvement of education not just for a select few, but for all students in their host districts, without regard to school governance.

ELC has long advocated for improvements to the current charter school law. Since the charter law was enacted 18 years ago, significant concerns and problems have arisen in New Jersey's charter sector that urgently require – as A4177 states – the establishment of “additional standards and safeguards to ensure that the charter school program is operated in an effective and accountable manner.”

We have championed many of the changes contained in the new bill that will increase charter school accountability and transparency, ensure appropriate fiscal oversight, foster meaningful innovation and district collaboration, settle disputes that have arisen about Department of Education management and oversight of the charter sector, and safeguard against further segregation of sub-groups of students, particularly in districts that are already intensely segregated by poverty and race.

ELC strongly supports the following proposals in A4177:

- increased accountability and transparency in all aspects of the charter school program, from the application process through operation and potential renewal or closing, including, but not limited to, the Commissioner of Education's goals for the sector, annual charter school budgets and performance reports, information about student demographics and student mobility, waiting lists, etc.;
- emphasis on ensuring comparability between student populations in charter schools and host districts, including a list of student demographic categories to be considered, such as students eligible for the federal free lunch program as distinct from those

eligible for the reduced lunch program, limited English proficient students and special education students;

- specific language directing the Commissioner of Education to solicit applications for charter schools that will meet the pressing needs of certain categories of New Jersey students, including those at risk of dropping out, English language learners, and students with disabilities to be served in an inclusive or least restrictive environment;
- the requirement that charter applications contain detailed information about budget, staff, facilities, instructional program and assessment, private funding, etc.
- a protocol for closing charter schools that protects students and families and ensures smooth transitions;
- explicit encouragement of collaboration between charter schools and host districts, whether in the form of shared services or cooperative educational programs;
- the requirement that charter schools be subject to QSAC, the State's accountability system, just as all other public schools and districts are.
- a mechanism for binding local input on charter approval or expansion.

We believe A4177 carefully reflects both experience and best practice in the charter sector. Indeed, we believe that A4177 is a national model for ensuring proper legislative authorization, oversight and accountability for charter schools – a model that other states will no doubt follow.

Most importantly, we also believe that implementation of A4177 will significantly benefit students and educators in both district and charter schools, and improve the delivery of public education across the state. We urge you to quickly pass the proposed bill in this committee, and we stand ready to work for its passage by the full Assembly and, ultimately, the Senate.