Garden State

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***Testimony before Senate Education Committee: S2319 Charter Schools/Ruiz – Discussion***

‘Modifies various aspects of charter school program, including authorization, regulation, and monitoring; appropriates $250,000 to DOE for expenses of charter school authorizing board’

***Committee Room 6, Statehouse Annex October 16, 2014***

Good morning, I am Lynne Strickland, Executive Director of the Garden State Coalition of Schools/GSCS. GSCS appreciates, and thanks Senator Ruiz and the Education Committee, for the invitation to talk with you today on S2319.

GSCS welcomes the measures of transparency and accountability this bill brings forth. Quality education is the underlying goal and is underscored by those features in the bill. The repeal of the conversion of high-performing nonpublic schools located in failing school districts into charter schools make sense as does the requirement for charter schools to make admission decisions through a certified public lottery when the number of students seeking admission exceeds the number of available spaces.

GSCS notes that neither charter school funding issues nor local input emerge in the bill. However, both issues are a rub in communities across New Jersey and will require resolution before charter schools can be comfortably integrated alongside traditional schools.

Re: Funding – Funding the charter schools is omitted from the bill. This issue has dogged the acceptance of charter schools in New Jersey over the years and will continue to unless addressed. It requires an in-depth analysis and discussion by policymakers. Here are some of the complexities of the funding issue for one GSCS member district in Middlesex County:

1. While the charter students must be supported by the same per pupil cost as the local district at $12,175 this year and,

1. While the district is considered to be the charter school’s ‘district of residence’ only 52% of the students attending the charter school this year are from that district. The district (as the ‘district of residence’) must annually put aside the amount of funding that charter ‘may’ require for the charter’s ‘projected’ enrollment in the next school year.

* In the first year of the charter school in this district, the charter projected enrollment to be 108 students, required approximately $1.2M to be encumbered by that district. The actual enrollment turned out to be 36 students for the charter.
* In this current year, 36 new students were projected to enroll yet only 10 students additional enrolled.
* This hold on funds within the district’s budget frustrates many in the community since a) some of the monies could have been spent on needs within the district and/or b) property taxes may have had to be raised above actual need. The district currently funds its school budget around 90% from local property taxpayers.

1. While it has been stated that there is a one for one cost per pupil no matter the setting in which the pupil situated, this theory does not often hold to fact. It is acknowledged that the larger a system and the larger the spread of students among grades, there may not be an impact on the number of teachers or classrooms required with the ebb and flow of students between traditional and charter schools. In this district’s case, they looked at what the fiscal impact on staff and space would be if the 160 charter students returned to the traditional schools this year. Result? None.
2. The lid of a 2% cap on budget growth places hardship on numbers of districts that have to reserve funds for projected enrollment growth in charter schools within the community. In the case of the Middlesex district referenced above, $2M had to be reserved for the current school year for the local charter school. Those dollars represented almost its entire cap allowance this year.

Re: Local Input – Because of the competing policy tugs and funding needs of charters and traditional schools within districts, communities are too often pitted against one another in the same towns and the same cities. A reasonable and calm arena for open information exchange, idea and concerns needs to be provided in the earlier stages of the approval process. Being heard and responded to realistically and openly is constructive and can allow for course correction as necessary.

Garden State Coalition looks forward to working with Senator Ruiz and the Education

Committee on these and other issues as this discussion moves ahead.

Thank you.