



Testimony of Tyler Barnett

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Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member Blunt Rochester and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to be here today to discuss school choice and literacy. I am Tyler Barnett, CEO of New Schools for Alabama. We are a nonprofit organization based in Birmingham, Alabama, and our mission is to support the growth of excellent charter schools in Alabama to ensure that every child has access to quality public education.

Charter Schools Nationally

As you likely know, charter schools have been a growing part of the national education landscape since 1991, when Minnesota enacted the country's first charter school law. Today, 46 states have charter schools, collectively serving nearly 4 million students from diverse backgrounds. And the largest national studies have shown that not only do charter schools deliver better outcomes, but their presence also improves outcomes for students in district schools.

Charter Schools in Alabama

In 2015, results such as these inspired Alabama to become the 43rd state in the nation to adopt a charter school law. For years, Alabama has ranked at or near the bottom among states nationally in educational outcomes, and, unfortunately, a student's zip code and socioeconomic status too often determine their academic success.

In Alabama, students in our poorest communities often have no other choice but to attend a low-performing school unless they have the financial means to relocate or pay for private school tuition. But with the advent of our charter school law, many families in Alabama's lowest-performing districts gained access to new, high-quality, tuition-free educational opportunities for their children. And parents are taking advantage of these new opportunities.

Since the 2018 school year, Alabama has grown from 1 charter school serving 250 students to 17 charter schools serving over 8,000 students. Over 70 percent of charter school students in Alabama qualify for free or reduced lunch, and over 80 percent are students of color, both of which are much higher percentages than the state average.

Encouragingly, this meteoric growth has produced not only more options but also improved outcomes, most notably in literacy. In the state's most recent literacy results, all but two charter schools in Alabama outperformed their district peers, and four outperformed the state average. Moreover, every charter school in the state has made significant academic gains over the past two years. Last year, three of the Top 25 Most Improved Schools in the state were charter schools, even though charters schools make up only 17 of the roughly 1,500 public schools in Alabama.

And perhaps most encouragingly, charter schools are delivering such results while operating at a grave disadvantage compared to their district peers. In Alabama, every charter school receives less funding than their comparison district with an average funding gap of nearly \$3,000 per student.

Charter Schools Program as a Catalyst

Notably, the primary catalyst for the dramatic increase in opportunities we are seeing in Alabama has been the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP). In 2019, New Schools for Alabama was awarded a \$25 million CSP State Entities Grant, which allowed us to make startup subgrants to support new charter schools in Alabama. Prior to receiving the CSP State Entities Grant, our charter movement was stagnant because of a shortage in startup capital.

Since receiving the grant, what was once a nascent sector of just one charter school has become what it is today: one of the fastest growing charter school sectors in the country.

While our current CSP State Entities Grant expires in September, we have applied for a new grant under the 2025 CSP State Entities Competition, and we are encouraged by the modifications that were made for this round.

Unmet Demand

The demand for more and better options among Alabama families is loud and clear. Despite historic enrollment growth, over 2,000 families remain on waitlists to get into charter schools in Alabama. If we truly believe that it is in the best interests of our country to provide students with a quality public education, we must recognize that monopolizing public education to a single district serving thousands of kids is not the most effective strategy.

In closing, I would like to state that charter schools represent just a part of a healthy educational ecosystem. And they alone are not a panacea to our educational woes. There are many factors that contribute to educational outcomes.

But we cannot continue reserving the right of choice for only the affluent. Charter schools offer parents another tuition-free opportunity, and the data proves that they play an important role in educating America's children. With continued dialogue, I hope that we can work together to improve education for all kids. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important matter.