

# **A Parent's Perspective on the Power of Charter Schools**

By Debbie Vaughn

Development Director, Lakes and Bridges Charter School

Testimony before:

Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP)

United States Senate

May 20, 2026

It is a privilege to be here today to share my family's experience with charter schools.

In 2015, a family friend approached me about helping start a charter school for students with dyslexia. My eldest child had been struggling with reading, so I didn't hesitate to say yes. At the time, I knew very little about charter schools, but I knew that far too many children with dyslexia were not being identified early or receiving the intervention they needed in traditional school settings.

Our founding team of nine people spent nearly a year and a half preparing our charter application. Combined, we had lots of degrees and decades of experience in education, finance, law, and public service; yet all of us will tell you that starting a charter school was the most difficult pursuit upon which any of us had ever embarked. We weren't interested in creating any old charter school. We wanted to create the best possible public charter school for kids with dyslexia—students who are frequently not served well in traditional public schools and all too often fall through the cracks when it comes to identification, intervention, and enrichment.

We also believed deeply that access mattered. Private schools specializing in dyslexia exist, but dyslexia does not only affect families who can afford tuition. We wanted to create a tuition-free public school that could provide evidence-based, specialized instruction to students regardless of income.

As part of the process, our team visited dyslexia-focused charter schools and private schools around the country. We worked with the SC Public Charter School Alliance. We met with legislators, educators, traditional public school superintendents, business leaders, and community members to learn how we could best serve students with dyslexia. One piece of advice we received (from Dr. Laura Cassidy, in her role as founder of Louisiana Key Academy) was especially important: find a way to prioritize enrollment for students with dyslexia who truly needed this specialized environment.

In SC, charter schools are open to ALL students, but those designated as an Alternate Education Campus (AEC) can prioritize enrollment specific populations. At the time, SC Charter School law allowed for AECs to serve various groups of at-risk students, but not students with specific learning needs. Our team approached The Hon. Gary Clary, our state representative, and asked if he would work to get the law amended so that AECs could prioritize enrollment students with a demonstrated need for evidence-based, specialized, multi-sensory instruction. Working alongside legislators in both the House and Senate, that amendment became law in 2016—a mere three months after it had been introduced.

Our charter was approved by the SCPCSD in April 2017, and thus began our planning year—it was filled with grant writing, fundraising, property searches, crafting organizational

policies and procedures, hiring teachers and staff, and everything else to get us to the first day of school.

Two poignant things happened during that planning year. First, because our property search took much longer than expected, we ended up partnering with the Pickens County School District and leased 7 classrooms and two offices in an elementary school just down the street from where we are currently located. Traditional public schools and charter schools typically do not play in the same sandbox, so to speak, but for that first year, Lakes and Bridges within Crosswell Elementary School. It was a wonderful, reciprocal relationship: having space at a Pickens County school allowed Lakes and Bridges to open, and being able to open allowed us to serve students that even Pickens County admitted were not being served in a traditional school as well as they could be in a specialized school.

Second, and most impactful, we began to meet the families for whom Lakes and Bridges was a beacon. Parents came to us exhausted, discouraged, and desperate for help. They described children who felt defeated, anxious, and incapable because they had struggled for so long without the right support. Our team had understood the need intellectually, but hearing those stories made the need deeply personal.

Lakes and Bridges opened on August 20, 2018 with 110 students in grades 1 – 5. We added a grade each year until the 2021-2022 school year when we reached our planned capacity of 200 students in grades 1 – 8. I was fortunate to begin working for the school in spring 2021 as the Development Director, a role that is necessary because, as a state charter school, we do not receive any county or local tax revenue, and we cannot raise taxes for building projects. Working in the school is a privilege I will never tire of or take for granted.

As a charter school, Lakes and Bridges has the autonomy to provide individualized, specialized, multi-sensory instruction using the Orton-Gillingham approach. Our leadership team meets weekly to review student data, adjust interventions, and ensure students receive support tailored to their needs. Teachers who came to us from traditional public schools often tell us they simply did not have the flexibility to provide this level of individualization in their previous settings. I truly believe the specialized instruction that Lakes and Bridges offers could not be replicated in a traditional public school.

This school year, Lakes and Bridges has reached several incredible milestones:

- We purchased our building
- Our middle school earned an Excellent on the SC Department of Education School Report Card—this is HUGE when you consider that almost 80% of our students have

an IEP or 504, and almost all of them come to us at least one grade level behind in reading and/or math

- Lakes and Bridges is the first Alternate Education Campus to ever earn a grade of Excellent on the School Report Card in all of SC
- Our middle school students exceeded both district and state averages for academic growth
- Our principal received the 2026 School Leader of the Year award from the Public Charter School Alliance of SC
- This spring's MAP assessment data reveals that 100% of our students are in the upper two quadrants of scoring; that is, ALL of them are high growth from fall to spring when it comes to learning... in fact, our school average for academic growth is in the 64<sup>th</sup> percentile for reading and the 58<sup>th</sup> percentile for math

For me, though, these accomplishments are most meaningful as a parent. Three of my children are Lakes and Bridges Dragons. My eldest, who finished 8<sup>th</sup> grade at Lakes and Bridges in 2022, graduates from high school on Saturday. My third-born finishes eighth grade and my youngest finishes fifth grade on Friday. When they came to Lakes and Bridges and finally received the intervention and enrichment they needed, they blossomed academically, emotionally, and socially. My husband and I could not have even imagined how much the right education would change their lives—and lift up our whole family. I am certain that the growth and success that each of them have earned would not have been possible in a traditional school setting.

Not to leave out my second-born, who is finishing 9<sup>th</sup> grade: he attended another charter school, Youth Leadership Academy, a middle school focused on leadership development and experiential learning. After the disruption of COVID, he needed a smaller environment and a place where he could rebuild confidence and learn to lead well. YLA provided exactly what he needed.

As a parent, I often feel frustrated that conversations about education policy are framed as “charter versus public schools,” focusing on what one doesn't do or what one takes away from the other. Charter schools are public schools. They are held accountable to academic standards, and students move between charter schools and traditional public schools all the time. The question should not be whether one system wins over another. The question should be whether families have access to quality educational options that meet the unique needs of their children.

Learning is not one-size-fits-all, and education should not be either. My children's lives were changed because school choice exists. Without charter schools, I truly do not believe they would be where they are today.