

***Wendell Steinhauer
NJ State Board of Education
Charter School Proposed Regulations—Second Discussion
January 4, 2017***

Good afternoon. I am Wendell Steinhauer, president of the New Jersey Education Association. We proudly represent over 200,000 active and retired public school employees across New Jersey, including over 1,000 members in public charter schools. Those public charter school members make a great contribution to our association and to public education in New Jersey. We look forward to representing many more of their colleagues in the future.

Let me begin by acknowledging and thanking the State Board of Education for recognizing the substantial deficiencies with the original proposed charter school regulations and making an effort, in part, to rectify them. While I appreciate the direction, the proposed amendments do not go nearly far enough to alleviate NJEA's concerns, which I'll detail in a minute.

But first, I would like to give a little background on NJEA's position on charter schools. We have supported the concept of public charter schools since the original charter law went into effect over 20 years ago.

Our policy on charter schools states, in part, that "NJEA supports high quality public charter schools as one component of an innovative, progressive system of public education," and that "public charter schools, along with magnet schools, vocational schools and traditional public schools can all play an important role as laboratories for innovation and provide a broad array of choices for parents."

NJEA believes these schools should be formed by educators and parents and should be operated and managed locally, with the sole focus of providing innovative, high quality education to all students.

Unfortunately, in the years since the 1996 law, we have seen a competing—and destructive—vision emerge. It's a vision at odds with the law's noble origins. This vision seeks to make two different public school systems, with widely different standards and expectations. Under this system, only for-profit or thinly-veiled "non-profit" operators create and expand charter schools from national chains. Those operators lobby to loosen rules and reduce their own accountability.

These "new" charter schools are answerable to SHAREHOLDERS, not STAKEHOLDERS—and students pay the price.

Their vision is focused on education of some—not all. Special education students or students learning English need not apply.

Their vision is focused on taking market share, not sharing knowledge.

The taxpayer monies flow to the few private operators at the top, not toward the students who need it most.

The worst example of this vision is articulated in the proposed regulations under discussion today. They are sweeping in their departure from long-standing best practices. These regulations would "water down" professional licensing standards, eviscerate fiscal accountability, open public assets to private exploitation, and otherwise create an unregulated, unaccountable, and mediocre subset of our public education system.

In sum, this "new" vision is not our vision for public education. It is also not the vision that propelled New Jersey to lead the nation in the education of our students.

As education experts, we know that charter schools should serve student populations that are representative of the communities in which they operate.

We need to have adequate fiscal and accountability safeguards on expansions to deal with an era of much larger and more sophisticated corporate charter school operators.

On May 22, 2016, NJEA's Delegate Assembly, our policy-making body made up of educators elected from across the state, voted to support a moratorium on the approval of any new applications for charter schools, any applications for expansion of existing charters, and any requests to expand the area of recruitment for an established charter until and unless:

1. The funding formula established under the School Funding Reform Act is fully funded for all public schools.
2. The public school district(s) affected have proposed and passed a balanced budget that did not require or include a reduction in force, for the two years prior to the application, as well as for the current year.
3. Public charter schools are required, through statute and regulation, to adhere to the same standards of accountability and transparency as traditional public schools in all matters.

NJEA vows to actively support proposals to ensure equitable funding for all public schools in the state and require that all public schools, including public charters, are held to the same standards of transparency and accountability.

And, we vow to actively oppose any regulatory proposal that would weaken the investigative powers of agencies tasked with ensuring a thorough and efficient education for all New Jersey children.

This moratorium on the approval of new charter schools would not eliminate public charter schools in New Jersey, nor even affect those already operating or approved.

It would, however, give us the opportunity to refocus the mission and strengthen our commitment to equity, access and excellent educational outcomes for all students.

In the weeks ahead, as we continue to discuss these proposed regulations, we want to restore the promise of the Charter School Program Act by staying true to its original mission.

So I implore this Board: Embrace high standards. Aim for a system that informs best practices and educates all our students. Ignore the pleas of those with private interests who only want to profit from our students. Review high quality research. And stay focused on our shared ideal—rigorous standards for all parts of our public education structure.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We look forward to more conversation and cooperation as these issues receive much-needed attention from the State Board of Education.