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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SUNY CHARTER INSTITUTE
FEBRUARY 28, 2019 PUBLIC HEARING
FOR CHARTER APPLICATIONS IN DISTRICTS 3, 5, & 6

MANHATTAN BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Borough President of Manhattan. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at tonight's public hearing. Based on the concerns expressed by my constituents, current research on charter schools, oversaturation of charters in Manhattan, and the divisive history of charter school expansions in school districts 3, 5, and 6, I urge the SUNY Charter Institute to deny these applications.

Over the years we have seen far too many students suffer from charter school policies of religious intolerance, dogmatic discipline codes, and inappropriate special education services. The Civil Rights Project of UCLA found that charter schools are even more racially and economically segregated than traditional public schools. Furthermore, whereas district schools follow the philosophy of educating the whole child, charter schools tend to treat young people as mere test scores. When students do not comply or are not able to conform to these degrading requirements, they are often “counseled out” – leaving families to scramble for new schools in the middle of the school year and crushing the spirits of some of the most vulnerable learners. The practice of counseling out also means that district schools do not get the appropriate funding to support incoming students because charters tend to force students back into the district after the deadline for funds to transfer has passed.

I recognize that all charter schools are not the same and some avoid the harmful practices that I have mentioned. However, the negative impact of having a parallel school system will never end unless we stop creating more charters schools in areas that already have too many. We should consider the original intention behind the charter system. When former president of the United Federation of Teachers, Al Shanker, spoke about creating charter schools within the public school system, he envisioned a small number of schools that served as laboratories for teachers to test innovative pedagogical practices. These charter schools would share their findings with district schools in order to improve the school system at large.

The current system is nothing like Al Shanker’s vision. For the most part, charter schools do not innovate and they do not collaborate with district schools. Yet, what may be most significant is the sheer number of charters. There are 6 school districts in Manhattan but 51 charter schools. Manhattan has 22% of all charters in New York City even though the borough only serves 15% of students. If you consider the number of charters in the affected districts – that is districts 3, 5, and 6 – you will find that these districts have a much greater share of charter schools than other

districts in the borough. For example, half of all students in District 5 attend charter schools. Clearly, this is not what Al Shanker intended.

Because of the proliferation of charters, district public schools face a funding crisis. The State of New York mandates that charters are funded at a base level of \$14,000 per student, but district public schools receive a base level of per pupil funding that is roughly \$4,100. That is a disparity of \$10,000 per student. The Fair Student Funding formula adjusts the amount of funding that goes toward district public school students based on needs and grade level, but that is true for charter schools as well. If you also consider that the public school system is mandated to provide space to charter schools in public school buildings or lease space for charters schools at the expense of tax payers, it becomes evident just how inequitable this education system has become as result of favoring charters.

I believe that all students deserve to attend fully-funded, high performing schools – not just the ones that attend charters. Today, there are numerous district public schools without the funds for afterschool, arts programming, and technology. Many schools operate in dilapidated buildings that need renovations and lead remediation. Given the current state of affairs in the New York City school system, we cannot allow a desire for charter schools to facilitate the suffering of district public school students. It is unfair, inequitable and does harm to children.

The SUNY trustees should listen to reason, heed the voices of communities that are affected by their decisions, and deny these requests to further undermine district public schools.