

December 12, 2019

The Honorable Bernie Sanders  
United State Senator  
P.O. Box 391  
Burlington, VT 05402

Dear Senator Sanders:

We write as three former Democratic state lawmakers who held leadership positions years ago in our respective state legislatures in Minnesota, California, and Colorado. All of us were the leading sponsors of ground-breaking legislation to establish a new form of public school choice to foster innovation in K-12 education: charter schools.

Since then, in mostly bipartisan fashion, state legislatures in 45 states have passed chartering laws, allowing more than 3.2 million K-12 students to attend over 7,000 charter public schools last school year. Since the first chartering law passed in Minnesota in 1991 with a strong bipartisan vote, we estimate there are over 10 million charter school alumni and educators (past and present) in the U.S. today. Charter schools disproportionately serve students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Two-thirds of children attending charter schools are students of color and nearly 60% of charter school students receive free or reduced priced lunch. Many charter school alumni now have families of their own. And they vote.

We are grateful to U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama for their steadfast support for chartering through their terms in office. President Clinton went so far as to personally endorse the leading book on the origins of chartering, Zero Chance of Passage: The Pioneering Charter School Story, written by our Minnesota colleague. And the federal Charter Schools Program enjoyed its largest funding increase under President Obama.

For us as lawmakers, chartering was all about providing new opportunities for families and educators: parental freedom to choose a public school; equal opportunity for every student; accountability to taxpayers; and innovative opportunities for students and educators. That's why up to the start of the Trump administration, over 2/3 of America consistently supported chartering, as measured by the highly-reputed Kappan Gallup poll. What else did 2/3 of America support at that time? Not much. That's why funding for chartering in Congress has always been bipartisan, starting with U.S. Senators David Durenberger (R-Minnesota) and Ted Kennedy (D-Massachusetts). While public support for chartering has appeared to decline in the current Trump administration, that is directly tied to the conflation of private school choice and chartering under a known advocate for private school vouchers, Secretary Betsy DeVos.

We write today because we are dismayed to hear leading Democratic presidential candidates threaten to roll back these chartering opportunities for future students, families and educators. We are surprised to hear candidates repeat the talking points and myths of long-time opponents of chartering—the same myths that each of us faced from our opponents as we navigated the first chartering legislation in our respective states. We are deeply concerned to see some states turning back the clock on chartering—returning to the public utility model of education where no state has real ability to bring about change within the public school districts.

Much of the opposition to charters comes from organized labor and the education establishment wedded to the status quo. And yet there are many local unions and districts who are open to charters and have formed valuable education partnerships with charter schools. Much of the anti-charter rhetoric we sometimes hear on the presidential campaign trail is inaccurate; charter schools are a valuable part of our public education system and are held accountable for results—more so than district schools. We hope you will embrace the opportunities charter schools provide for millions of young people and their families who often believe the traditional public school system is not responsive to their needs.

To set the record straight, we write to offer you and your staff important factual resources on the issue, as appended to this letter. In addition, all of us have recorded video oral histories of chartering in our respective states and contributed our original documents to the National Charter Schools Founders Library at [www.charterinstitute.org/library](http://www.charterinstitute.org/library). We request a meeting with you to discuss the importance of chartering and public school choice to both your policy agenda and your political success.

Keeping chartering laws in place means allowing innovation and opportunities to flourish for families across the nation. To shut down chartering is not to shut down individual schools; it is to shut down an entire education sector that grew because of the grit and perseverance of teachers and parents who wanted a chance to try something better for their families. It is about shutting down autonomy and opportunity for educators—such as the first union-initiated charter school authorizer established in Minnesota in 2012, and the union entrepreneurs nationally who led the way in establishing teacher-led schools in both district and charter schools.

We are approaching the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of chartering in 2021, the year that you could be inaugurated as President of the United States. Do we want our Democratic legacy to be the end of one of the most prolific grass roots revolutions to create true education opportunity for all? We look forward to talking with you personally about this important issue. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Former Minnesota State Senator Ember Reichgott Junge, 1983-2000; Senate Assistant Majority Leader  
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Former California Assemblyman and State Senator Gary Hart, 1974-1994, Chair, Senate Education Committee, [garykhart@comcast.net](mailto:garykhart@comcast.net)

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Attached: [Charter 101, Just the Facts](#)