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Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3.2 million members of the National Education Association (NEA), we would like to express our views on the Empowering Parents through Quality Charter Schools Act (H.R. 2218). While we cannot support the bill at this time, we look forward to working with the Committee and remaining engaged in discussions to improve the bill prior to action on the House floor.

NEA supports high-quality charter schools that: operate in a manner that is transparent and accountable to parents and taxpayers; do not increase segregation by family income, ethnicity, or race; and solicit and benefit from input from parents, school staff, and the communities they serve. Educators support innovation in our nation's schools, and public charter schools that operate in a transparent, accountable manner can contribute to that goal. We caution the Committee, however, that charter schools are not a panacea for solving all education challenges. There is considerable research that documents a mixed record of success among charter schools. For this reason we encourage the Committee to continue to enhance language that focuses on charter school and authorizer accountability.

We are pleased that the proposal before the Committee increases protections for English Language Learners and students with disabilities. We support the language stating that charter schools should enroll and promote an inclusive educational environment for these traditionally underserved students, as well as comply with other requirements in IDEA and ESEA designed to protect student rights. We believe it is critical to ensure protections that help these students stay and succeed in charter schools and, therefore, we would encourage additional emphasis on encouraging student retention.

We also strongly support language requiring publicly reported annual audits of charter schools and the recognition of the need for state involvement in improving authorizer quality. Strengthened transparency and accountability is essential to ensure high-quality, successful charter schools. We believe this language could be further improved, as outlined below.

We do have a number of serious concerns with the proposal before the Committee that prevent us from supporting the bill at this time:

- **Transparency:** We believe there should be clearer requirements for charter school authorizers to work directly with charter schools to conduct annual financial audits. In addition, there should be quality control measures that require authorizers to meet or exceed the principles established by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. States should require charter schools to disclose publicly all funding sources (including non-public), student attrition rates, and student demographic characteristics.

We are concerned that there appears to be little or no mention of parent or community input into the authorizing process. The experience of our members guides us in firmly believing that charter

schools – as with any public school – are most successful when parents, educators and whole communities support their existence and success.

Improving the quality of authorizing processes and decisions would increase the proportion of high-quality charter schools and reduce the number of schools that need to be closed due to poor quality. Strengthening audit requirements will help reduce fraud and other financial irregularities. Research shows that in comparison with other public schools, charter schools as a whole spend more on administrative overhead and less on student instruction.

We have concerns as to whether private non-profit entities classified by the Internal Revenue Code as 501(c)(3) entities would be permitted to evade reporting requirements under this bill due to the current "protection" those entities are afforded from having to disclose donors. At a minimum, we would recommend that private non-profits who seek to become charter school funders, authorizers, and/ or operators be required to disclose any and all funding sources that are directly or indirectly used for the charter school or its students.

- **Accountability:** It is unclear on the face of the bill language whether charters would be required to meet the same accountability measures as traditional public schools and specifically whether federal accountability regulations under Title I would apply. It is our hope that this is the intent of the bill language, so as to prohibit different standards of accountability within the public education system. In addition, there is no requirement that eligible entities report all sources of funding they receive. Charter schools require oversight and accountability for quality and financial integrity and should have to answer to parents and taxpayers for all of their funding sources.

In addition, the proposal expands the types of applicants for the grant to include the school district, a state charter school board, or the Governor. Permitting Governors to receive direct grants from the federal government is problematic as Governors' offices are not set up to monitor schools or hold authorizers accountable.

- **Equity:** Adequate education resources play a critical role in improving achievement for all students. While the proposal requires states to ensure "equitable financing" between regular public schools and charter schools, there is no requirement for monitoring or reporting of all non-public sources of funds flowing into charter schools. This lack of transparency and accountability will exacerbate resource and opportunity gaps between schools. NEA's members have fought for equity in public education since the late 1800's. This is a sacred core value for our members.

Given the above-outlined concerns, we cannot support the bill at this time. We look forward to working with the Committee and remaining engaged in discussions to improve the bill prior to action on the House floor.

Sincerely,



Kim Anderson
Director of Government Relations



Mary Kusler
Manager of Federal Advocacy