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TESTIMONY

**Joint Committee on Education
SB 234/SB 236/HB 465 An Act Relative to Charter Schools
Testimony of Christopher R. Anderson, President
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Thank you, Chairman O'Leary and Chairman Walz for the opportunity this afternoon to speak regarding a bill and an issue that is of significant concern to the state's technology industry leadership and its future. I appreciate the extent to which the Committee is reaching out to hear from stakeholders across the state on this crucial issue.

The Massachusetts High Technology Council was formed in 1977 by high tech CEOs whose mission was to help make Massachusetts the most competitive state in which to create, operate, and expand high tech businesses. That remains our mission today. Council members employ hundreds of thousands of skilled workers in all of Massachusetts' key technology sectors, including computer hardware, life sciences, software, medical products, defense technology, semiconductor, and telecommunications. Our board includes the executive leadership of tech employers such as Thermo Fisher, Dynamics Research, Vertex, and HP.

During the past three decades education policy has been a priority on equal footing with economic policy in the eyes of our more than 100 CEO-members and we believe it is among the most important issues the legislature and administration will address this year.

In Massachusetts, while we are doing better in educating our children than the other 49 states, we have within our 351 cities and towns an unacceptable disparity between high performing schools and school districts and underperforming schools and school districts. While serving as a member, then Chair of the state board of education between 2006 and 2008, I was particularly pleased to have helped extend the success of Boston's pilot schools to communities with schools that that needed innovative school models to reverse declining performance.

I also spearheaded a campaign to have Massachusetts students join their peers from classrooms in 68 nations as participants in the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS). Massachusetts was one of 2 states to compete as if we were our own nation. Our results were so good, that on March 9, President Obama cited the Commonwealth's outstanding performance on the TIMSS test that proved our fourth- and eighth-grade students match up with the world's best in math and science.

Massachusetts was entered as its own nation and scored as follows:

8th Grade Math – 6th
8th Grade Science – 3rd
4th Grade Math – 4th
4th Grade Science – 2nd

This distinction illustrated the president's call for strong standards and accountability (such as our MCAS system) as well as innovative school models such as charter public schools.

Challenging schools across the nation to improve, the president called on states to “lift caps on the number of allowable charter schools, wherever such caps are in place.” Having appointed Chicago's top educator and charter school champion Arne Duncan as his Secretary of Education, the president is putting his money where his mouth is and is challenging members of his party who have largely opposed charters to get on board.

That should be good news for students and parents in Massachusetts. The state's 1993 Education Reform Act launched a limited number of charter schools. Unfortunately, the state currently has caps that limit access to charter schools.

The results of a definitive study on the benefits of charter schools conducted by the Boston Foundation this year are stunning. The estimated effect of a year spent in a Boston charter school is often quite similar to that of a year spent in one of the city's elite exam schools. In a single year, academic gains are the equivalent of half the size of the achievement gap between minority and white students. Between fourth and eighth grade, the test scores of charter middle school students rose from slightly above Boston's average to almost equal to the Brookline public schools.

Unfortunately, student capacity in charter public schools in many high need communities has been reached because of a state law that arbitrarily caps the number of charters in each community. This statute limits the amount of state spending that can go to charter schools at 9% of the district's net school spending.

This cap is denying parents and students freedom of educational choice. Proven options in high need communities like Boston, Holyoke, Worcester, Fall River, Lawrence and Springfield, are artificially limited and demand is high. Right now there are more than 21,000 children on waiting lists to gain admission to these schools. That alone should drive home the fact that we cannot afford to play politics at the expense of the needs of our children and the interests of the parents who are trying to provide what's best for them.

I recently had the pleasure of visiting Roxbury Prep, a 10 year old Mission Hill middle school that has twice been recognized with an EPIC Award (Effective Practice Incentive Community) as a national model for innovative and effective practices.

Students entering Roxbury Prep are doing so at 20% proficiency in math and science and 3 grade levels behind in reading. I will not take the several hours required to detail all of the methods utilized at this remarkable school, but I will tell you that the school ranks in the top 10 in 8th grade math MCAS scores in the state. Not among Boston Public Schools, TOP 10 IN THE STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS.

This year the school will admit its largest class of 100 incoming 6th graders and while that is heartening news for those students, nearly half of the students and parents vying for a place at this school were denied the opportunity.

As you can imagine, with results like these the founders of Roxbury Prep – Even Rudall and John King - are very well regarded and have been asked to replicate the best-practices and methods that made Roxbury Prep a standout among its peer schools.

Mr. King and Mr. Rudall have spent the past 5 years doing just that. They were approached by city and state governments that were hungry for educational innovation, intent on closing the achievement gap and producing students that will compete for the highest scores and be prepared to enter any high school or college classroom with the confidence that they have been properly prepared.

These two innovators have successfully replicated the winning model employed at Roxbury Prep in New York City, Upstate New York and New Jersey where government officials begged them to operate and continue to work with them to ensure that the progress continues.

The reason they were unable to continue their strong work in Massachusetts and Boston specifically, is that there was so much opposition to the work that they were doing, much of their time and energy was spent justifying their very existence. Additionally, the arbitrary caps placed on charter schools made it nearly impossible to grow in the areas with the greatest need.

Any postponement of a cap expansion in Massachusetts lowest performing districts further widens the achievement gap and deprives students of the best possible education. For that reason, we urge swift action on Senate Bill 236 filed by Sen. Jack Hart and co-sponsored by Rep. Eugene O’Flaherty, which would raise the charter cap to 20% in those school systems that have average MCAS scores in the bottom 10 percent statewide.

Innovative schools represent just one element in a list of improvements required to create a world-class education system in Massachusetts and that expanding the cap from its current 9% to 20% in only the most dramatically underperforming areas is not a solution. While it allows some relief, it is certainly not innovation employed to the degree that President Obama or the Massachusetts business community should or will be satisfied. In the case of charter schools, however, the demand is there, the results are proven, and the current limit is unjustifiable. We cannot consider ourselves a world-class education system while slamming the door in the faces of thousands of parents and students who seek a proven standard of education.

