

**New York State Legislature
SFY 2016-17 Elementary & Secondary Education Joint Budget Hearing
January 27, 2016**

**Budget Committee Testimony
Submitted by: Asia Thomas, StudentsFirstNY Organizer**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Young, Chairman Farrell, Education Committee Chairs Marcellino and Nolan. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Executive Budget proposal for state fiscal year (SFY) 2016-2017. I appreciate all the work that you and your colleagues do on behalf of New Yorkers.

I am submitting my testimony today because I want you to understand how the decisions you make in Albany impact real people in their everyday lives. The Governor has advanced sensible proposals in his Executive budget that would expand school choice for parents and students by guaranteeing that public charter schools in New York City have access to space and increased financial support. Some have come out to oppose the Governor's proposals, but I will tell you that it is wrong to cheat public charter school kids out of the resources given to district school kids. All public schools deserve adequate space and equal funding. It's time to stop treating charter schools inequitably.

I wake up every morning at 5:00 am to bring my eight year-old son from Staten Island to a Success Academy in Brooklyn. We take a ferry, two trains, and a bus together before I can drop him off. Our daily commute together isn't easy, and I know it is especially tiring for my son, but I feel lucky that he won the lottery to get a spot at such a great public school. I know that in order for him to develop into an excellent student, and to live a successful and fulfilling life, the most important thing is that he attends the right school for him. Success Academy is the right fit for my son, and I am happy to make the long journey with him there, and back every day to make sure he gets the education he deserves.

I make this sacrifice because I understand how critical education is – for my son and for every child. It's because of this that I became a parent organizer for StudentsFirstNY. StudentsFirstNY works to ensure that every child in New York State has the same opportunity as my son. We believe that every child deserves a quality education, regardless of where they live. That's why we work each and every day to make sure that parents have the information they need to make informed decisions about where to send their kids to school.

I've been active in my community since I can remember, and I know from personal experience that being a parent in New York is difficult. There is an enormous amount of pressure on parents to raise their kids to be successful students so that they can grow into productive adults.

That's why I believe we need to do more to help parents across New York State. That includes giving every public school student the same amount of support by giving all public schools – district and charter – the same amount of financial support and access to space. A student is a student, and I don't think it's right that charter school kids like my son are shortchanged by the system.

We should also help families by expanding the choices they have in where to send their kids to schools. Passing a school tax credit will help give working families some of the same choices that wealthier families take for granted.

There are special interests that don't even want schools like my son's to exist, so they actively try to tear them down. They don't want families to have a choice in where to send their kids to school, because parents like me will do everything we can to avoid being trapped in the failing system they are fighting so hard to protect. They try to generate negative stories about charter schools, exploiting a rare anecdote about one unhappy parent or even creating their own reports slamming their competition. But this shouldn't be about them and what they want. Please don't let their narrow political interests put up roadblocks for our kids. Unlike the district school system, charter schools are already held accountable and we as parents welcome that. Our children deserve more than political posturing by adults – they deserve high quality school choices.

As parents, we owe our children every opportunity to lead a successful and fulfilling life. That's why the work you are doing here is so important, because the decisions you make will have a profound impact on shaping their futures with a more equitable, transparent and accountable school system.

Again, thank you for allowing me to submit testimony to you on behalf of my son and all New York City public charter schools kids.