

SB247 Press Conference

March 20, 2019

Natalie Beyer, Durham County Board of Education Member

Last night in Durham I attended a screening of a new film “The Best of Enemies” with the amazing Taraji P. Henson. This movie is based on the true story of the integration of our public schools in Durham - grounded in our belief that every family shares the dream of excellent, equitable school communities. As a community we merged our separate but unequal city and county school systems and are strengthening our innovative local public schools every day. Sadly North Carolina’s charter school legislation is re-creating a new separate and unequal school system in our community. Since the cap on charter schools in NC was removed the number of charter schools in Durham has doubled to 14 and approximately 14% of school aged children attend charter schools. This includes two virtual charter schools - which have little oversight and abysmal academic performance.

Currently Durham taxpayers spend over \$24 million dollars in local funding every year for nearly 7,000 charter school students. This includes 6,123 students in brick and mortar charter schools in Durham County, 710 students in 33 charter schools located OUTSIDE of Durham County and 126 students in 2 virtual charter schools. A 2018 study at Duke University examined how the presence of charter schools affected public school funding: in Durham, public school services were reduced by \$500-\$700 per pupil. As a taxpayer I am concerned about the rapid expansion of charter schools across our state and support Senate Bill 247 that calls for a statewide study of the impact on charter schools. It is been demonstrated that in North Carolina traditional school districts are outperforming charter schools on measures of growth. In our community we have six charter schools that earned school performance grades of D including one that has been in operation over 20 years. Both virtual charter schools earned school performance grades of D and students failed to even meet growth.

Charter schools do not reflect the diversity of our community. In Durham nearly two thirds of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch but in Durham charter schools that figure is less than 20%. One of my primary concerns is growing racial isolation in charter schools. Most charter schools do not reflect the diverse racial makeup of our local community. Most charter schools in Durham serve mainly black students while a few are predominantly comprised of white students. Latino students are grossly underrepresented in charter schools in Durham and across the state. A Durham charter school director shares this concern and lamented that "We were becoming a vehicle, in many ways, for class and for white flight."

Several years ago the State Board of Education made the rare decision to close the high school grades of a Durham charter school after it was discovered that for eight years the school had awarded high school diplomas to hundreds of students who did not meet minimal state graduation requirements. That school is already talking about reopening high school grades. Our board frequently is contacted by charter school families with grievances and we have to tell parents that unfortunately there is no one locally elected to represent them. Recently the State Board of Education approved a new charter school for Durham despite inadequacies in the application and letters of opposition from our Mayor, County Commissioners, School Board and the majority of our City Council.

These are not partisan issues and we can all agree that we want good governance for all students. Nationally the largest authorizer of charter schools are local boards of education but NC's laws do not permit local school boards to authorize charter schools. If state law was improved, charter schools could operate more like magnet schools. Better state charter school policy must improve transparency for students and accountability for taxpayer funds. I am thankful for the sponsors of Senate Bill 247 who are working to make sure every school makes the grade for each and every student.