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Sen. Kate Sullivan  
District 41  
Room 1107  
P.O. Box 94604  
State Capitol  
Lincoln, NE 68509

Dear Senator Sullivan and Members of the Education Committee:

I am writing to support LB 593, the Charter Schools Act, and request that this letter be made part of the official record on this promising piece of legislation.

Born and raised in the Omaha area, I have spent the last twenty-plus years teaching in urban schools and working in education reform in cities including Los Angeles and Washington, DC. In these cities, I have watched the advent of charter schools offering low-income and minority students new and better educational options that have broken cycles of low academic achievement and helped propel students towards college and successful careers.

Not every city's or state's charter school program has been successfully launched and managed, but the ones that have been—including in Newark, Indianapolis, New York City, Boston, Washington, DC, and others—are showing outstanding success in reducing the achievement gap between low-income minority students and their peers and increasingly moving towards eliminating it.

Why and how a charter school program is successful in a given state or city is primarily a reflection of the legislation that created it and, specifically, what body was put in charge of authorizing the charter schools. If the authorizer is not capable of selecting and overseeing great schools—and holding them accountable for results—the outcome is often not much different than when traditional school systems fail; accountability for student outcomes must be demanded.

Since the first charter school opened over twenty years ago, much has been learned about what makes a charter school program successful; there is absolutely no reason why Nebraska cannot use what has been learned from programs elsewhere to successfully use charter schools to solve its most intractable problem: the achievement gap in Omaha schools between those serving the low-income, mostly African-American community of North Omaha and their peers elsewhere.

In the best charter schools, like those I featured in my short documentary film *Unchartered Territory*, determined and capable school leaders have created new schools that, by having local control of their budgets; staff hiring, firing and training; curriculum; programming; school calendar, etc. are able to meet their students' specific needs and ensure every single teacher and staff person in the school is working towards students' success.

People I meet who are not from Omaha assume it is a wealthy city—they equate the city with the success of Warren Buffett—and many know it has a notably low unemployment rate. What most people do not know is that Omaha was also the birthplace of Malcolm X and is fairly diverse. However, the black population of Omaha—especially in North Omaha—does not enjoy the same level of affluence as the rest of the city and has long been afflicted by cycles of poverty, underemployment and lower educational attainment. Indeed, in doing recent research for a potential new film, I learned that:

- Omaha has the highest percentage of black children living in poverty in the nation: 59.4%.
- Omaha ranks 3rd in the nation for percentage of black residents (of all ages) living in poverty.
- North Omaha, where the black population is highly concentrated, has the third-highest black homicide rate in the nation.
- Black graduation rates are below 50% in Omaha (as of 2009).

There is simply no excuse for a city of Omaha's wealth and resources not to implement *proven solutions* to reduce the achievement gap and give its most vulnerable citizens—low-income, minority children—the opportunity to break through cycles of despair and join the thriving economy.

I strongly support State Sen. Lautenbaugh's Charter School Act, LB 593, and hope the legislature will not lose this opportunity to help ensure every student in Omaha has the chance to achieve his or her potential.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kelly Amis  
Loudspeaker Films

Some Sources:

<http://credo.stanford.edu/research-reports.html>

<http://www.publiccharters.org/About-Charter-Schools/How-Charters-Perform.aspx>

<http://www.economist.com/node/21558265>