

March 31, 2025

Senator Kunesch, Chair
Senate Education Finance Committee Members
75 Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Blvd
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Kunesch and Members of the Committee:

My name is Brandon Wait, and I serve as the Executive Director and Principal of Paladin Career & Technical High School, a public charter school in Coon Rapids. Paladin specializes in serving students who have struggled in traditional settings. **Approximately 60% of our students come from low-income families, and 35% receive special education services (twice the state average).** Despite significant challenges, these young people find support, inspiration, and success in our hallways.

I am deeply concerned about the **proposed cuts to public charter school funding in SF2255**, especially reductions in special education aid. Charter schools rely primarily on state per-pupil funding, as we cannot levy local property taxes. We already operate with fewer resources than traditional district schools but meet the same standards and expectations. Further funding reductions threaten the stability and success of our most vulnerable learners.

At Paladin, losing even one staff member, such as a special education teacher or social worker, can result in the loss of an entire support program. Reductions could mean dozens of students suddenly losing essential counseling, individualized instruction, or behavioral support. For students with emotional-behavioral disorders or those on the autism spectrum, consistent support often determines whether they thrive academically or disengage entirely.

Additionally, funding cuts would force us to scale back the innovative programs that define our school: project-based learning, career and technical education, and trauma-informed care. These resource-intensive programs are precisely what attract families to Paladin and have proven successful in engaging our students. Reduced funding jeopardizes these critical interventions and risks reversing the gains our students have achieved.

Minnesota's innovative public charter schools educate nearly 70,000 public school students statewide, serving diverse needs from language immersion and STEM to service learning to specialized support for students with academic struggles. Families actively choose these environments because we (as charters) best meet their child's needs. **The proposed budget cuts compound this inequity, contradicting Minnesota's core values of fairness and equal opportunity.** Without proper resources, charter schools will struggle to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, resulting in lower academic outcomes, reduced opportunities, and



increased dropout rates. Adequate funding ensures that all students, regardless of their challenges, have a chance to succeed and contribute meaningfully to society.

To illustrate further, let me briefly share a student success story from Paladin. "Casey" came to us significantly credit-deficient, having struggled at several previous schools. At Paladin, he thrived through our personalized and supportive approach, earning a pre-apprenticeship certification, and eventually graduating. Today, he is successfully employed and pursuing higher education. Casey's journey underscores the importance of sustained funding and support for programs uniquely tailored to students' diverse needs.

Reducing charter school funding won't eliminate student needs, it will shift and potentially increase costs elsewhere. If charter schools cannot adequately serve their students, districts will assume this responsibility, potentially at greater expense. Supporting charter schools now is a wise, efficient investment in Minnesota's children.

On behalf of my students, staff, and our entire school community, I respectfully urge you to protect the funding that allows us to do this important work. Let's stand together – Republicans and Democrats, rural and metro – in saying that we will not shortchange any student's future. Thank you for your consideration and for standing firmly with ***ALL*** public school students.

Respectfully,

Brandon N. Wait

Executive Director & Principal, Paladin Career & Technical High School
Coon Rapids, Minnesota

