

State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Education Committee
Public Hearing
March 12, 2007
Testimony Submitted by
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Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Committee. My name is Elizabeth C. Brown and I am the Legislative Director for the Commission on Children. I appreciate the opportunity to speak in support of many bills before you that seek to enhance educational opportunities for all children in Connecticut through innovation, best practice, accountability and attention to the nexus between suspensions, expulsions, truancy and academic failure and the need to assist school districts to establish prevention and early intervention strategies.

The policies embedded today also recognize the importance of strategic community partners by strengthening the After School Grant and Youth Service System.

Innovation in Education

Support: H.B. 7345, An Act Concerning Great Schools for All- seeks to implement competitive grants to offer school districts funds to address the key issues plaguing many school districts in Connecticut. The Commission supports the policy direction this bill represents, but urges attention to the capacity of the State Department of Education to administer and provide the educational road map for success. Without the right personnel in place with knowledge and experience in implementing best practices in teaching, this grant program will not meet the high expectations envisioned. Although innovation and accountability join in this bill, there needs to be a concerted effort to address the systemic issues of poverty and segregation that have deterred our best efforts over the years.

Support: RB 1405, An Act Concerning Intervention Model for Schools in Need of Improvement and Concerning Urban Education- seeks to establish CommPact schools, public, non-sectarian schools, with the flexibility to implement research-based school reform strategies. In addition the bill calls for a formal partnership with the School of Education at the University of Connecticut to provide technical, ongoing assistance to school districts in need of improvement. It further calls for a new competitive grant to other institutions of higher education and non-profits to provide mentoring and tutoring. The Commission commends the movement to true partnership between school districts

and Higher Education, but the designation of U-Conn over other institutions of higher education as the primary education delivery center may inadvertently exclude access to exemplary faculty in other institutions. Perhaps a broader net can be cast to include more colleges and non-profits that excel in teaching and educational leadership.

Truancy, Suspension and Expulsion

The following bills seeks to focus on the alarming number of students who are truant, suspended and or expelled from school especially in our urban school districts. Research tells us that these students are at highest risk for involvement in the Juvenile Justice System and school failure. More alarmingly, students of color are disproportionately in these categories.

I had the honor of serving on the Juvenile Jurisdiction Planning Committee, commonly called the Raise the Age Committee. Over the course of our deliberations, it became apparent that students who are truant, suspended or expelled are more than likely to end up in the Juvenile Justice System. **In fact, 87% of youth in the Juvenile Justice System are students who fall into those categories! And just as alarming, over 90% of young men from ages 15 to 21 years who are incarcerated at Mason Prison are reading on a 3rd grade level!** It's no surprise that the "farm team" for the adult prison system comprises recruits from cities with the highest rates of suspension, expulsions and truancy- Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, Bridgeport and New Britain.

The Commission supports the following policies that seek to address this persistent, systemic issue:

Support; RB 7272, An Act Concerning Suspensions and Expulsions by Local and Regional Boards of Education- Provides an incentive for a student to get back on the right track after being suspended or expelled by participating in a program to help the student instead of just the punitive approach.

Support; RB 1413, An Act Concerning In-School Suspension- establishes a policy of in school suspension. As a member both Hartford's and Waterbury's Truancy Task Force established to address the issue, this is the one thing all participants agree on-keeping the kids out of school is a direct line to delinquent behavior. In addition, students get farther behind in their course work and lose hope of catching up so failure becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. School Districts do face obstacles to full implementation including space and additional faculty. But we know many school districts have adopted this policy so it can be done. This is truly the most important policy shift to break the cycle of failure of too many of our students.

Support: RB 7359, An Act Concerning A Grant Program to Combat Truancy- establishes a **YES- Youth Engaged in School Grant-** to provide funds to school districts to implement truancy prevention and intervention programs. The grant will be administered by the Department of Education in conjunction with the Youth

Futures Committee established pursuant to PA 06-182. The Youth Futures Committee, established last year, is charged with developing a comprehensive plan, across state agencies, to promote positive youth development. By creating this partnership, school districts can leverage the expertise and resources of many state agencies who are working in communities with the same youth and their families. Again, the bill calls for implementation of school wide discipline policies, similar to that mentioned in RB 1114, An Act Implementing the Governor's Recommendations Concerning Education focused on research based programs.

The bill also recognizes that school districts need family and community partners to meet the needs of students and calls for collaboration among key local stakeholders. Students involved in positive activities like sports, drama, dance, song, scouting and other activities with caring, competent adults are more likely to succeed in school and in life.

At a recent meeting of Waterbury's Truancy Commission, the Juvenile Court prosecutor and probation officer both spoke of the positive impact of access to the YMCA and PAL programs were having on kids in the Family With Service Needs System. The YES bill will provide resources to local communities to keep youth connected to school and help meet the goals in so many of the bills before you to close the achievement gap and give every student hope for a successful future.

After School and Youth Service Bureaus Support: RB 7348, An Act Concerning After School and Out of School Time Grants- seeks to strengthen Connecticut's After School System. In keeping with the state plan for After School developed pursuant to PA 03-206 that called for a state wide coordinated system with high quality and attention to positive outcomes for students, the bill provides the Education Department with the flexibility to administer the grant and provide technical assistance to grantees and local community after school networks. After School Works! Research indicates that students participating in after school programs are more likely to do homework, develop good inter-personal skills and are more likely to have positive connections to school, peers and the community.

Support: RB 1411, An Act Concerning Youth Service Bureaus- seeks to provide funds to Youth Service Bureaus to fulfill the vision embedded in state statute governing YSB's. YSB's play a critical role in towns and cities across Connecticut. They are the first line of defense in keeping kids engaged and on the right track. It's a sad commentary on funding priorities when a youth has to be in a Family With Service Needs Program to obtain assessments for mental health and educational needs. This bill recognizes that community support before trouble arises is the most cost effective strategy in the long run.

Universal Kindergarten and K-3rd Grade Assessments

Support: Raised Bill 7360, An Act Concerning Transition from Preschool to School. Data needs to guide our teaching and to ensure that each and every child succeeds in

school. Without assessment in the early years, we miss the opportunity for intervention when intervention most matters to learning patterns and school motivation. By third grade, a child has decided whether he is interested in being an active and successful learner.

As you know, Connecticut is tempered by a downturn in reading scores for the state's fourth-graders on both the national test and the state's Mastery Tests. Last year, Connecticut ranked worst in the nation in "poverty gap in proficiency" on the NAEP tests. Only 15 % of Hartford's third graders are reading at grade level. The average literacy level for men and women in prison is third grade.

Education Week noted some additional discouraging findings for Connecticut, including a decline in performance in eighth-grade reading scores between 1998 and 2005 and a slight widening of the achievement gap in both reading and math between white and black eighth-graders.

Poor reading skills are a direct bus route to corrections. If a child cannot read by third grade, they are on a downward trajectory, unless they receive intensive intervention. We need to be assessing children at each grade to see how to best intervene promptly and reliably.

Support: RB 7355, An Act Concerning a Study of Universal Preschool. Ed Zigler, the founder of Head Start and the first Director of the Children's Bureau for the United States, says that the biggest policy mistake he made in his career was having Head Start just be for poor children. The literature informs us that children fare best when in cross-class settings. Language improves, as is newly evidenced by Ct scholar, Dr. Carlotta Schecter's study on children and literacy. Preschool will only succeed when it is for all children. Programs that are isolated for just one sector, over time, fail for lack of insistence on quality, accountability and/or a large enough constituency demanding the service. Also, preschool is of import to children across this state.

However, the gains of preschool are not reaped for just four year olds. The study performed by the State Department of Education and the CT Commission on Children in your packet, *Opening the Kindergarten Door*, informs us that the gains in preschool are much stronger for children when they have both preschool as a three year old as well as a four year old. Two years of preschool makes a stronger difference than one year in language and literacy, math, social/emotional and fine motor skills development.

The Commission applauds the Committee's bold vision and leadership for education reform in Connecticut and believes they hold promise for excellence in education for all students. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

ALL YOUTHS HAVE A SAFE AND ENRICHING AFTERSCHOOL EXPERIENCE: After School

Key Facts

- Only one-third of Connecticut's school-age children – 185,000 out of 610,000 – are involved in supervised, safe, enriching after-school programs.ⁱ
- The peak hours for violent juvenile crime are from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. Juvenile crime triples when the school bell rings.ⁱⁱ Young people are more likely to be the victims of violent crime in the hour after the end of the school day than at any other hour of the day.ⁱⁱⁱ
- More than 70% of parents of school-aged children work outside the home. Yet, only one third of children are involved in supervised, structured and enriching after school programs.
- Children with nowhere to go after school are more likely to experiment with drugs and sexuality. The peak hours of juvenile crime are from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., and violent juvenile crime soars in the first hour after school gets out. Children who are not involved in school activity and oversight are likely to receive poor grades, and commit school vandalism.
- After school programs keep children out of harm's way while teaching the skills and core values they need to succeed. Quality after school programs can cut by as much as 75% the risk of becoming involved in crime.^{iv}
- Eighth-graders left home alone reported much greater use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana than children not left home alone.^v A 1999 study that examined the effects of self-care among urban children in low-income families found that children who spent more time home alone in third grade displayed more behavior problems both in third grade and later when they reached fifth grade.^{vi}
- Connecticut boasts many fine private and public after school programs that keep kids safe, and enhance personal, social and academic skills. Yet, a significant shortage of out of school time programming exists during the peak after school hours when most parents are working.
- Parents in Connecticut think after school is critical, but they are frustrated by a fragmented system and need help in determining quality and age appropriate programs. A recent Connecticut survey found that nine in ten (91 percent) parents and school personnel surveyed believe it is "very important" that before and after school

activities be available at their schools. Barriers to operating before/after school programs include insufficient funds, transportation, and staffing issues.

Prevention Savings

- Rigorous studies show that after-school programs can:
 - Reduce juvenile crime and violence
 - Reduce drug use and addiction
 - Cut other risky behavior like smoking and alcohol abuse
 - Reduce teen sex and teen pregnancies
 - Boost school success and high school graduation.^{vii}

What Connecticut Has Done

An Act Concerning Afterschool Programs (P.A. 03-206) mandated a permanent statewide Afterschool Committee with a diverse membership, an important step in promoting awareness of the importance of afterschool and in making the move to a statewide, coordinated approach to afterschool systemic.

The Afterschool Committee brought stakeholders together to gain public support and to inspire and influence the development of policies in support of afterschool programs. Its ultimate aim is for sufficient quality afterschool programs to help all students learn, grow, and in communities with high poverty rates, overcome the achievement gap.

In 2005, the state put \$1 million into after school care, attending to program need as well as the coordination of after school programs in Connecticut.

What Remains to Be Done

The state should increase availability of afterschool programs to the two-thirds of school-age children who lack this important opportunity.

After School-Ensure quality after school opportunity for children and youth while parents work and school has ended to bolster social skills, cognition, and to decrease loitering, drug and sexual experimentation. Utilize Connecticut's After School community grant program that provides funding to local collaborations to meet the specific after school needs of each community.

ⁱ L. Brown & S. Pons. *After the School Bell Rings!* Connecticut AfterSchool Alliance. Undated.

ⁱⁱ S. Newman, J. Fox, E. Flynn & W. Christeson. (2000). *America's After-School Choice*. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱⁱ H. Snyder & M. Sickmund (September 1999), *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

^{iv} Connecticut Commission on Children. <<http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/After%20School%20statistics.htm>>

^v K.M. Dwyer, J.L. Richardson, K.L. Danley, W.B. Hansen, S.Y. Sussman, B. Brannon, C.W. Dent, C.A. Johnson and B.R. Flay. (1990). Characteristics of Eighth-Grade Students Who Initiate Self-Care in Elementary and Junior High School. *Pediatrics* (86:3), 448-454.

^{vi} D.L. Vandell and J. Posner (1999). "Conceptualization and Measurement of Children's After-school Environments." In S.L. Friedman and T.D. Wachs, Eds., *Assessment of the Environment Across the Lifespan*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press.

^{vii} S. Newman, J. Fox, E. Flynn & W. Christeson (2000). *America's After-School Choice. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids*, Washington, DC.