Great Schools for All
Connecticut

Public Hearing Testimony Speaker: Alex Johnston

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Broad Agreement on Problems in Connecticut Public Schools, Alternative Solutions Presented to Education Committee

What: Educational Committee Hearing on 2007 Legislation
When: Monday, March 12 at 12:30 p.m.
Where: Room 1E, Legislative Office Building, Hartford, CT

Education advocates increasingly agree that there is a crisis of educational inequality in Connecticut's public education system:

- Connecticut is 50th out of 50 states in terms of the achievement gap, which means on average low-income 8th graders have the reading, writing and math skills of 5th graders from more affluent families.
- Fewer than one in three Hartford students graduate from high school in four years with a diploma.
- The percentage of young workers in Connecticut with a Bachelor's degree is projected to decline over the next decade.

A wide variety of stakeholders in Connecticut say that we can close these achievement gaps, reverse the decline in educational attainment, and provide every child in our state with access to a great public school. They are gathering in Hartford on March 12th to lend their voice to the more than 30 bills under consideration by the Education Committee to address this crisis.

While there is growing agreement about the severity of the problem, alternative solutions to closing the achievement gap have emerged in the past two months.

Great Schools for All. Some of Connecticut's largest parents' rights advocates, community action groups, business associations, and nonprofit education organizations have joined together in supporting the "Great Schools for All" initiative. This approach, represented principally in House Bill 7345 "An Act Concerning Great Schools for All," is grounded in free high-quality preschool for low-income families, more entrepreneurial school leadership, lower barriers to teacher and principal recruitment, greater parental choices, more new public school options (charters, magnets, pilots and small high schools), competitive state grants tied to proven district reforms, greater state and district leadership capacity, more public transparency, and stronger accountability for results. The two-year cost would be approximately $120 million.

Urban Initiative. Connecticut's teachers unions, superintendent and administrator associations, and the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education have come together to introduce the "Urban Initiative." This approach, represented by Senate Bill 1405 "An Act Concerning Intervention Model for Schools in Need of Improvement and Concerning Urban Education," is focused on new best-practice mandates for failing schools, one model for creating new public schools (CommPACT schools), the creation of an education service delivery center at the University of Connecticut, and more money for colleges and universities to run tutoring programs. The two-year cost would be approximately $15 million.

"The debate over the severity of the problem is over. Now we must all work together to help pass a comprehensive solution that will ensure every child in our state has access to a great public

school," says Alex Johnston, executive director of the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now. The key education bills under debate include:

HB 7345: An Act Concerning Great Schools for All

- Increases the number of free, high-quality preschool slots for low-income families from 7,000 to 11,100 and integrates the information collected in preschool programs into the K-12 data system to measure effectiveness and help parents make informed choices.
- Provides the State Department of Education with $29 million to run competitive grant programs that help districts implement proven education reforms, including pilot schools, small high schools, district-wide improvement plans, and innovative teacher and principal recruitment programs grounded in streamlined certification and nonprofit partnerships.
- Requires the State Department of Education to create and implement a data system for tracking individual student progress by November 30, 2007 and requires that state colleges and universities extend student tracking through grade 16 by October 1, 2008.
- Requires the State Department of Education to implement a public rating system for all public schools based on annual grades of A, B, C, D or F for student achievement gains and annual scores of 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 for qualitative assessments of educational practices.
- Provides schools in high-needs districts with a score of A-1 on this annual review a bonus of $500 per student to share best practices and pioneer new educational innovations, and places schools with less than a C-3 for two consecutive years on probation.
- If schools do not improve, provides the Commissioner of Education with authority to intervene to raise performance by 1) reconstituting schools into charter schools, pilot schools, or other district management, 2) replacing school leadership, including boards of education, superintendents, principals and teachers, 3) redirecting funding so that students can attend public schools in a neighboring district, and 4) taking over a school or district with approval from the Governor and the General Assembly.

SB 1405: An Act Concerning Intervention Model for Schools in Need of Improvement and Concerning Urban Education

- Requires that every elementary or middle school that has failed to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years be reorganized into several smaller academies and mandates that these have no more than 175 students, the same curriculum, a teacher as team leader, intense faculty collaboration, 90-minute math blocks and two-hour literacy blocks every day, and formative assessments on a biweekly and semi-monthly basis.
- Establishes an educational service delivery center at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education.
- Establishes CommPACT schools, which operate autonomously from school boards, and provides each CommPACT school up to $300 per student.
- Establishes a college and university-based tutoring and mentoring program.

Summaries of eleven of the most important raised bills to be heard at the March 12th hearing can be found on ConnCAN's website at:
http://www.conncan.org/matriarch/MultiPiecePage.asp_Q_PageID_E_141_A_PageName_E_IssuesLegSummaries

The deadline for action on these bills by the Education Committee is March 30.

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The Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN) is a statewide outreach, education, and research organization working to close Connecticut's achievement gap. To learn more visit: **www.conncan.org**.