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Child
Advocacy
Coalition

"Mobilizing on Behalf of Children"

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TESTIMONY

before

GENERAL ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Tuesday, February 20, 2007

Greetings, Chairmen and Member of the Education Committee. We appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. The intertwined issues of state education funding and changes to the Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) formula to update it to the 21st century are some of the most important issues that will be considered and acted upon by this General Assembly.

My name is Marilyn Ondrasik and I am the Executive Director of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC). Many of you have seen our PowerPoint presentation, Leave No City Behind, that details the huge inequities in how state education funding has been distributed over the years that have shortchanged the Bridgeport schools by more than \$100 million over the last five years alone.

The truth is that the antiquated ECS formula no longer works for this state. It creates huge inequities; it ignores our state's constitutional obligation to provide an equal educational opportunity to all children in this state regardless of where they live; and it ignores the looming crisis in failing schools under the federal legislation, No Child Left Behind.

Adjustments to the ECS formula to make it work for our state and take us into the 21st century include a better way to measure poor students. The current formula uses 1996 welfare data for children in a municipality. It does not give out funding based on the poverty of students in the public schools. A more accurate measure of student poverty is those who qualify for free and reduced price school meals.

A second adjustment that also recognizes the reality of our state in the 21st century is the huge and growing number of students from homes in which English is not spoken or English language learners (ELL students). Take a look at immigrant populations in our large and medium-size cities. Bridgeport schools have nearly 40% of students from homes in which English is not spoken. Hartford has 47%, New Britain 43%, Danbury 38%, Stamford and Norwalk 35%, Meriden and New Haven

28%. See attachment table for more information on other school districts with large percentages of students from homes in which English is not spoken.

Just take a look at the CMT data for test scores. Between 75-85% of students who are not poor meet the state goal on the CMT test in reading and math. Only 33-46% of poor students can meet goal in reading and math, *about half as many*. But our urban school districts have not just one important student demographic that has a substantial impact on test scores, but THREE critical student demographics that have a tremendous impact on test scores: poor students; students who are both poor and from homes in which English is not spoken; and students who are both poor and need special education services.

For students who are both English language learners and who need special education services and are also poor, the impact is much more severe than being only poor. *Only 11-25% of students who are poor and English Language Learners score at or above goal*. This reality is not reflected in the current ECS formula. The weighting for ELL students must be increased substantially to provide adequate funding to educate these students. See the tables for the impact of the three student demographics on test scores that are attached to this testimony.

A further look shows that only *6-11% of special education students* score at goal on the CMT tests. The current special education excess cost formula addresses very, very expensive special education services. These very expensive special education services are more likely to be offered by wealthier school districts for a variety of reasons including that wealthier parents are more likely to sue a school district to get the best special education services for their child. Urban parents are less likely to sue. Wealthier school districts are more likely to be able to pay for expensive out-of-district placements and expensive in-district services. See the attached table that shows which school districts benefit from changes in the special education excess cost formula. A better way to address adequately

funding special education services is to reimburse a percentage of special education services for both severe and moderate need students, not just for high-priced services.

By addressing ALL THREE critical student demographics, school districts will be provided with the resources they need to help all students achieve. And Connecticut's test scores bear out the importance of this shift in thinking. These three student demographics are linked to lower test scores on the CMT and CAPT tests with students who are poor and ELL or who are poor and special education scoring much worse than just poor students alone. Shouldn't state education funding be structured to address ALL THREE critical student demographics?

Raising the foundation level to reflect the real cost to educate students in Connecticut is the last adjustment that needs to be made – BUT doing this alone without first adjusting the funding to address the THREE critical student demographics will not achieve change in the struggling school districts. If only the foundation level is increased, again, it is the wealthier school districts that will benefit. Without the adjustments that give realistic weight to all THREE critical student demographics, the ECS formula does not do what it was envisioned to do.

With these adjustments to the ECS formula, our state would be targeting increased funding to school districts who are struggling to educate the most challenging students. Connecticut would be abiding by its constitutional mandate to provide an equal educational opportunity to all public school children in our state.

We understand that state educational funding must increase dramatically to address Connecticut's "worst-in-the-nation" achievement gap. This can be phased in over the next several years with appropriate accountability measures and monitoring to ensure proper use of increased funding and state intervention when necessary. This legislative session is the time to start to make good on the state's promise to provide an equitable education to all public school students because you will be passing a two-year budget.

Lastly, BCAC strongly supports providing quality preschool education for all low-income children. The research on the benefits of preschool attendance is compelling. It helps young children come to school ready, reduces retention and the need for special education services, and improves academic outcomes. Bridgeport's own data shows that students with preschool experience do better on all measures, grade retention, report cards, standard reading tests, and attendance than those children with no preschool experience. Over the last ten years, the percentage of Bridgeport children entering kindergarten with preschool experience jumped from 49% to 66% as a direct result of state school readiness funding. Still, Bridgeport has more than 1,000 3- and 4-year-olds cannot participate in preschool because of lack of resources. We urge you to support increased preschool funding, targeted to Priority School Districts.

But again, increasing the availability of quality preschool alone is not the answer. Don't we wish there were a single answer to improving student achievement. If students with quality preschool don't continue to have quality teachers, small class sizes, remedial and other support interventions when needed, the research also shows that the gains they achieve as young children do not continue.

So, a combination of adjustments to the ECS formula along with the resources phased in over a few years to fully fund the state's constitutional promise along with universal preschool phased in over several years are the best way to bring Connecticut into the 21st century and to ensure our continued growth and economic vitality as a state.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to say sometime in the near future that Connecticut does not have the widest achievement gap in the entire country?

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today.

Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition

**Students from Homes in Which English Is Not Spoken
English Language Learners (ELL)
2005-06 School Year**

School District	Percentage of K-12 ELL Students
Hartford	46.8%
New Britain	42.7%
Bridgeport	38.6%
Danbury	37.5%
Norwalk	35.5%
Stamford	35.3%
New Haven	28.7%
Windham	28.1%
Meriden	28.0%
New London	25.5%

IMPACT ON CMT TEST SCORES IN READING AND MATH

35-45% of Poor Students Meet/Exceed State Goal

11-13% of Students Who Are Poor and ELL Meet/Exceed State Goal

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Who Benefited the Last Time The Special Education Excess Cost Sharing Grant Was Changed?

	Total Excess Cost Sharing Grant 2005-06 (4.5 times the NCEP)*	Total Excess Cost Sharing Grant 2004-05 (5 times the NCEP)*	% Change
Bridgeport	\$ 2,269,320	\$ 1,399,076	62.2%
Darien	\$ 1,156,996	\$ 860,728	67.7%
Fairfield	\$ 1,504,054	\$ 671,933	80.7%
Monroe	\$326,673	\$190,007	71.9%
Westport	\$ 548,587	\$ 301,444	82.0%

The Special Education Excess Cost grant reimburses school districts for the high costs of educating students with very special needs. Prior to 2005-06, school districts were reimbursed for the costs for an individual child's special education expenses that were greater than 5 times the previous year's Net Current Expenditures per Pupil (NCEP)*.

In 2005-06, the reimbursement rate was changed to 4.5 times the NCEP. For example, in 2005-06 Bridgeport's NCEP was \$10,708. The district was reimbursed for those special education expenses that exceeded \$48,187 (\$10,708 x 4.5) per student.

* NCEP (Net Current Expenditure per Pupil) is based on all current public school expenditures from all sources (city, state, federal, private), excluding reimbursable regular education transportation, tuition revenue, capital expenditures for land, buildings and equipment, and debt service.

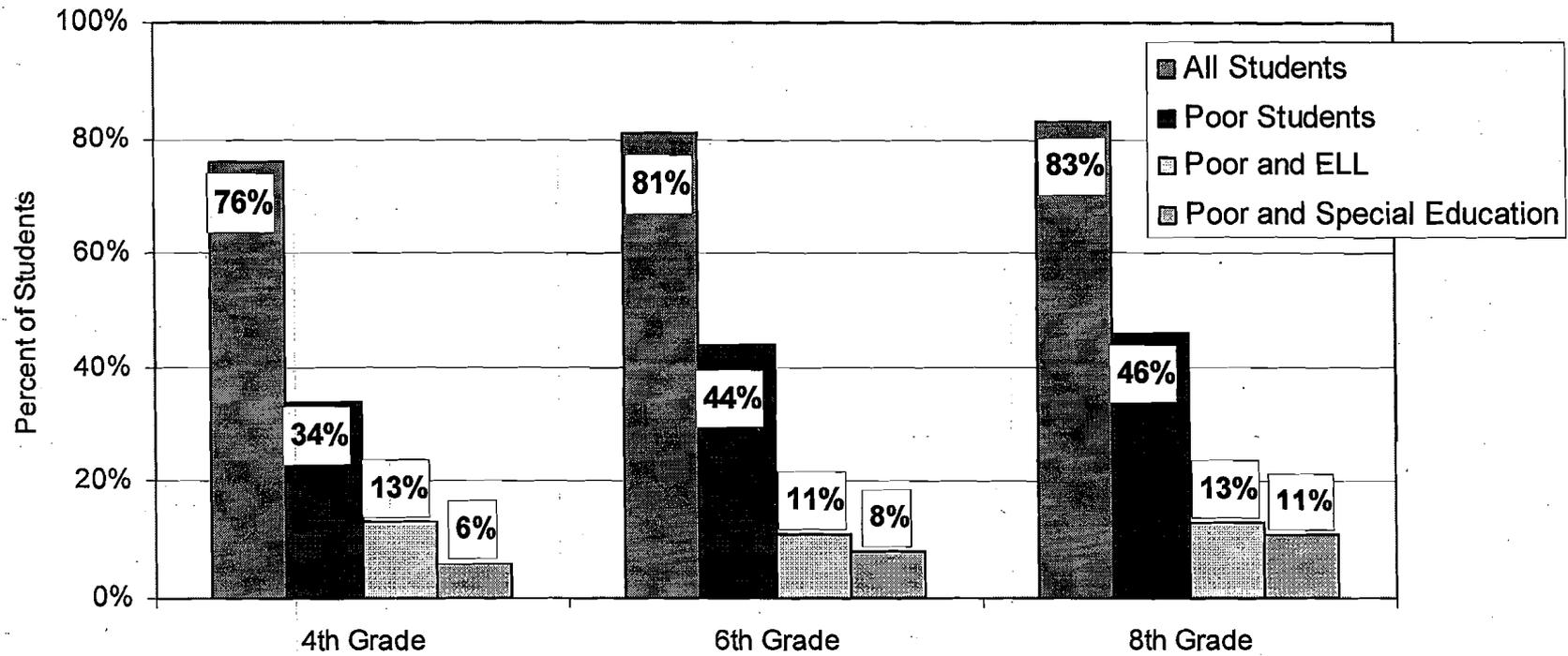
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How Various School Districts Would Fare if the ONLY Change In the ECS Formula Was to Increase the Foundation Level by \$1,000, From \$5,981 to \$6,981

Town	ECS At Current Foundation \$5,891 2006-07	ECS If Foundation Increases to \$6,891 2006-07	\$\$ Change If Foundation Increases by \$1,000	% Change If Foundation Increases by \$1,000
Bridgeport	\$147,107,433	\$160,516,793	\$13,409,360	9.1%
Hartford	\$170,113,053	\$174,521,229	\$4,408,176	2.6%
New Haven	\$128,491,056	\$136,842,822	\$8,351,766	6.5%
Darien	\$1,031,384	\$1,905,795	\$874,411	84.8%
Easton	\$399,292	\$674,357	\$275,065	68.9%
Fairfield	\$412,530	\$3,979,678	\$1,567,148	65.0%
Greenwich	\$2,297,232	\$3,840,738	\$1,543,506	67.2%
New Canaan	\$974,458	\$1,746,755	\$772,297	79.3%
Weston	\$621,222	\$1,072,831	\$451,609	72.7%
Westport	\$1,277,247	\$2,315,496	\$1,038,249	81.3%
Wilton	\$1,004,671	\$1,785,710	\$781,039	77.7%

Source: CT State Department of Education, 2/10/07

Poor Students Who are English Language Learners or in Special Education are MUCH LESS Likely to Meet Goal on the CMT Test in Reading



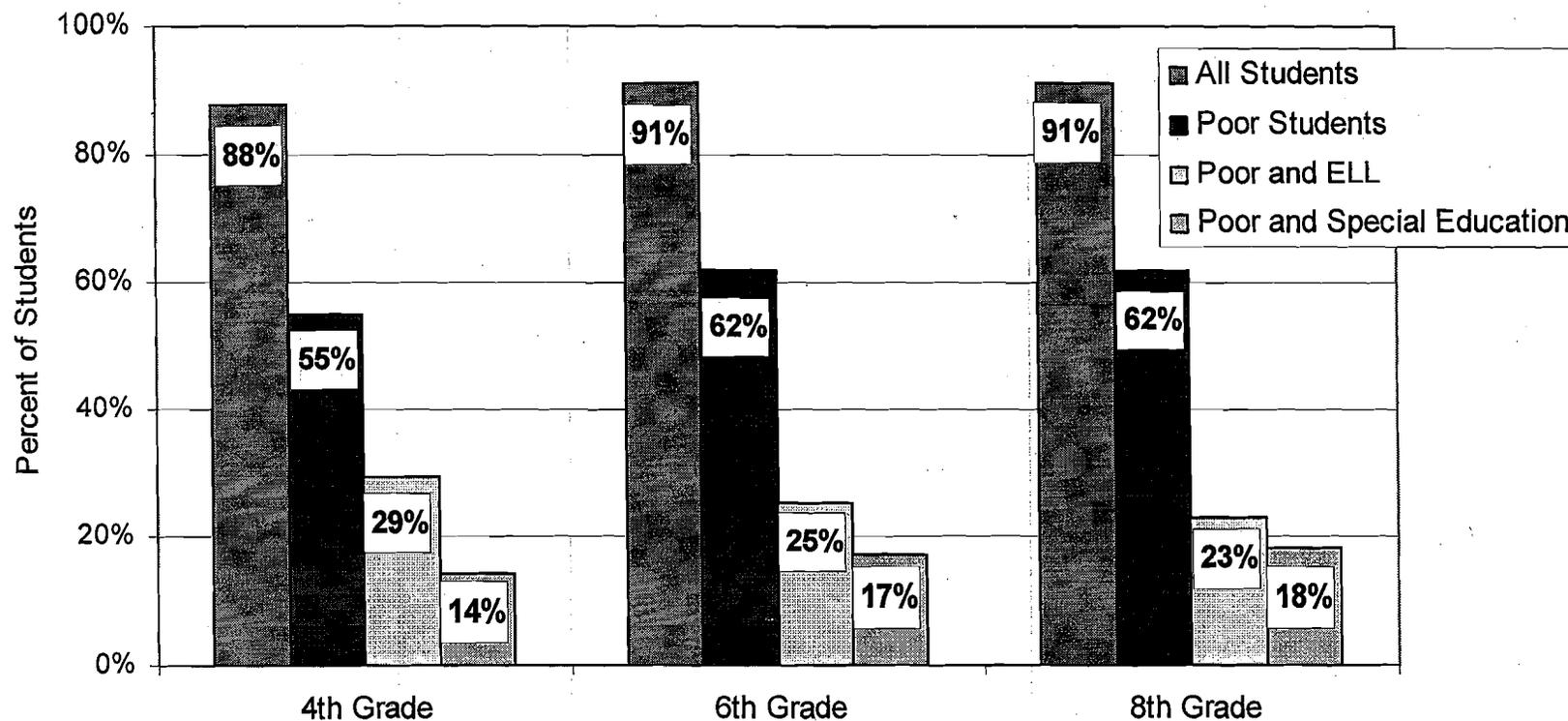
2006 CMT Results
% of Students Statewide Meeting Goal in Reading
by Demographic Subgroup

* All Students excludes Poor Students, English Language Learners and Special Education Students

** ELL = English Language Learners

Source: CMT Data Interaction, cmtreports.com.

Poor Students Who are English Language Learners or in Special Education are MUCH LESS Likely to Meet Proficiency on the CMT Test in Reading



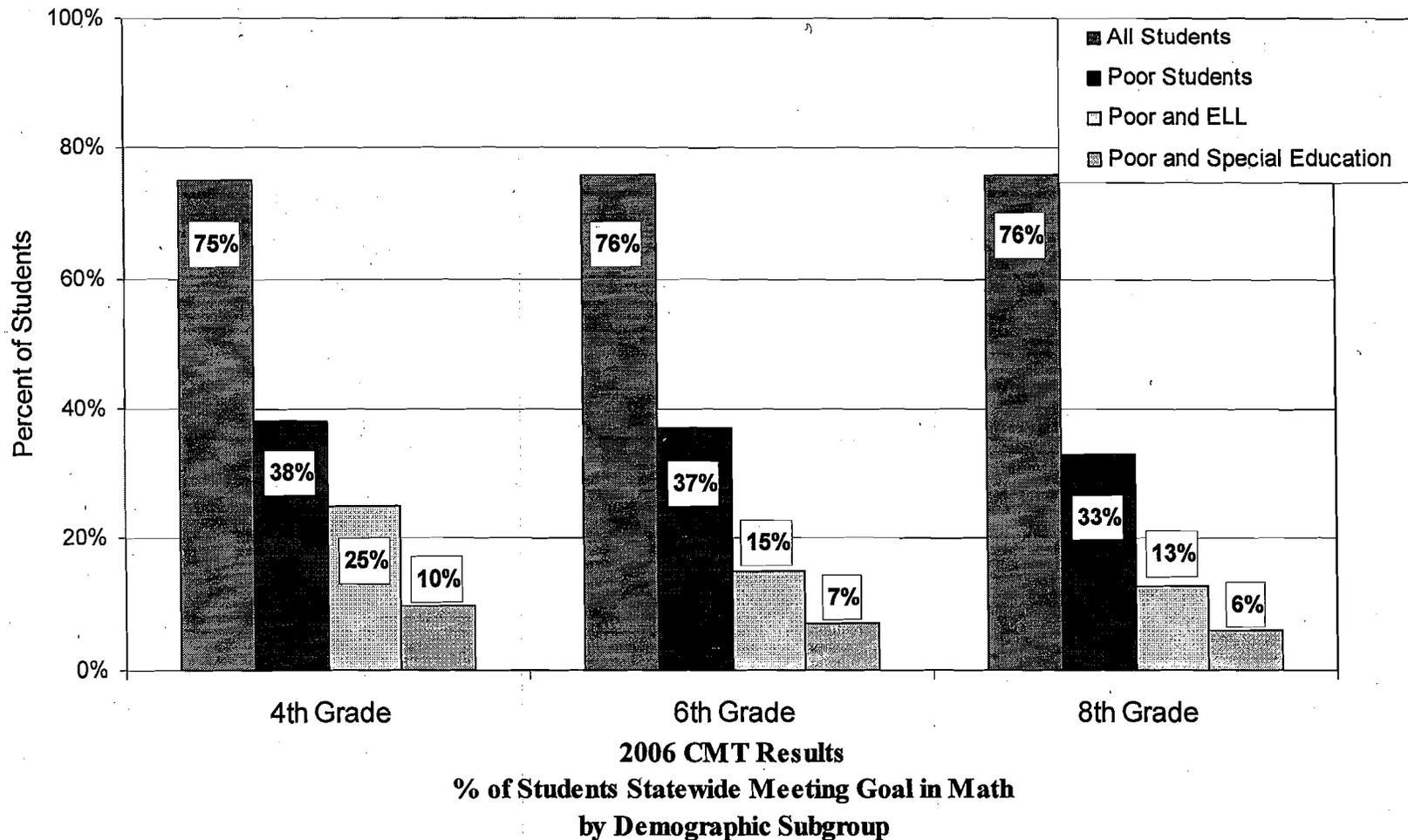
2006 CMT Results
% of Students Statewide Meeting Proficiency in Reading
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* All Students excludes Poor Students, English Language Learners and Special Education Students

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Poor Students Who are English Language Learners or in Special Education are MUCH LESS Likely to Meet Goal on the CMT Test in Math

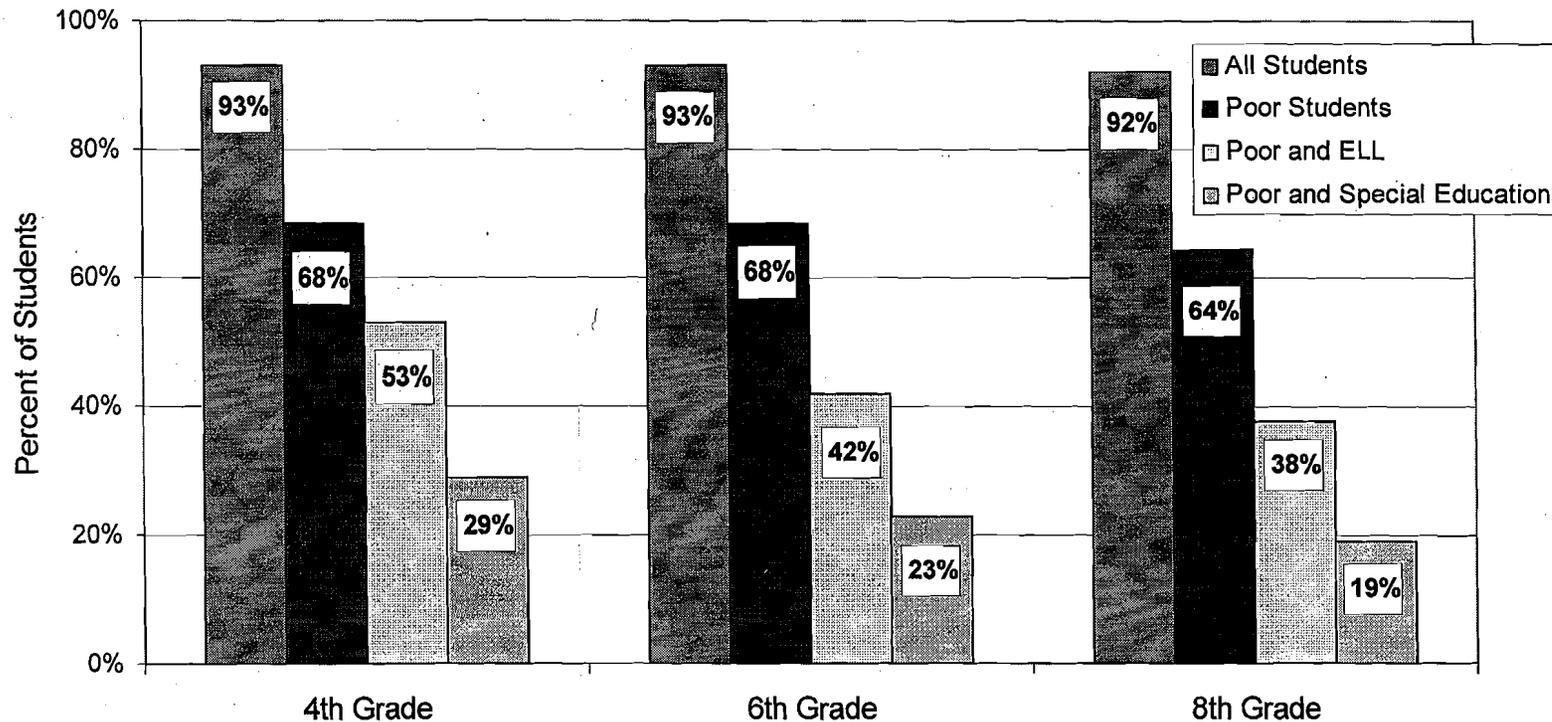


* All Students excludes Poor Students, English Language Learners and Special Education Students

** ELL = English Language Learners

Source: CMT Data Interaction, cmtreports.com.

Poor Students Who are English Language Learners or in Special Education are MUCH LESS Likely to Meet Proficiency on the CMT Test in Math



2006 CMT Results
% of Students Statewide Meeting Proficiency in Math
by Demographic Subgroup

* All Students excludes Poor Students, English Language Learners and Special Education Students

** ELL = English Language Learners

Bridgeport's Schools Were Forced to Make \$11 Million in Cuts for the 2006-07 School Year

- **Closed Newfield and Barnum Annex, sending 300 students to 6 already over-crowded schools and requiring the conversion of music and art rooms into classrooms**
- **Eliminated 32 teaching positions, 6 at the high schools, 24 at the elementary schools and 2 in special education**
- **Increased class size in 7th and 8th grade in 5 schools from an average of 23 students to as many as 27 students per class**
- **Reduced AP classes and electives in the high schools because of cutbacks in teaching staff**
- **Eliminated 3 guidance counselors, one principal and one assistant principal at the elementary school level**
- **Reduced teaching, security, custodial, student support, and clerical staffing at the brand new Cesar Batalla School when it opens in January 2007**
- **Eliminated school busing for 250 Harding High School students**
- **Eliminated as many as 40 positions left vacant by paraprofessionals who were let go because they did not have the credentials required under No City Left Behind**
- **Eliminated 2 central office administrative positions and 3 clerical positions, further straining an already severely stretched central administrative staff for the school district**

**These cuts follow \$6.2 million in cuts made during the
2004-2005 school year**