

TESTIMONY

Education Committee

February 13, 2007

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Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischman and members of the Education Committee. I am Sharon Palmer, President of AFT Connecticut a 26,000 member AFL-CIO union. I am here today to share some thoughts on RB7047. AAC School District Accountability. You should also know I served on the accountability subcommittee of the Governor's Commission on Education Finance.

The bill sets forth most of the concepts from the subcommittee report but in a mingled and conglomerated fashion which does not reflect the thinking of the subcommittee. The accountability subcommittee report offers a continuum of interventions with four stages and a possible state take over only after a fourth stage of intervention is reached.

There are parts of the bill and parts of the accountability report which we do not agree with. However, I'd like to focus on the positive and talk about the process set out in the report which we believe has the best chance of producing positive results.

We have a history in Connecticut of takeovers, both educational and financial in some of our most troubled municipalities. I would submit to you that none of these have produced significant fundamental change in the way "business" is conducted. In fact, if West Haven had its way they would come back for a second take over.

Fundamental to any behavior modification program is the concept that ultimately only the individual can change his/her behavior. This same concept is applied to school districts in the accountability subcommittee work. The State Department of Education will require the districts to report on a number measures then recommend corrective actions which the district should undertake. Assistance would be available from the State

Department of Education. If progress is not made the State Department of Education would require districts to complete an audit and make changes based on that fiscal and instructional audit. Only after the district has had ample opportunity for corrective action would a state takeover occur.

We believe this process, with the involvement of all the stakeholders at the district level, will be more effective in producing real, positive change. We would like to work with you to make RB7047 more reflective of the process set forth in the accountability subcommittee report.

Thank you for providing this opportunity.

Grant Caps and Minimum Grants (Stoploss).

The removal of the grant cap should be a priority in the phase-in process. It is the expectation that once fully funded, there will no longer be any capping of ECS grant increases from one year to the next. In terms of guaranteed minimum funding, the subcommittee understands that despite all of the recommendations to the formula, there may be a handful of districts whose formula aid may still be under their current funding levels. For those limited number of districts, the formula should provide some relief.

ACCOUNTABILITY SUBCOMMITTEE

PART 1-ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALL

Accountability means holding education stakeholders (such as districts, schools, teachers, administrators, parents and students) responsible for classroom achievement. No one would argue about the power or importance of knowledge-and that all of Connecticut's children need and deserve the very best opportunities to achieve in school and later in life. With the landmark levels of new education funding that the Commission on Education Finance (CEF) is proposing, Connecticut is planning to create an education accountability system that will be a model for education reform. Of necessity, this system will also be consistent and integrated with any federal requirements, including those associated with *No Child Left Behind*.

In Connecticut's new accountability system, the State Department of Education (SDE) will collect and analyze individual student data on a number of academic and behavioral indices. Since the State will be investing significant new taxpayer dollars into the education of its students, there will be an expectation, to be verified by the data, that every student, school and district will improve with the new education resources.

While Connecticut has long documented student academic progress, there is now compelling data that demonstrates how behavior affects students, classrooms, teachers and administrators. Students, who are suspended or are otherwise removed from class, lose precious classroom learning time. Teachers, who must deal with disruptive students, have their teaching time, and the learning time of their non-disruptive students, interrupted. Administrators, who are required to discipline the disruptive students, find their instructional leadership role diminished because an inordinate amount of time is spent with disruptive students. It is important, therefore, to collect and analyze the data for students' academic and behavioral progress.

The data collection will include student cohorts measured over time:

<u>Academic Measures</u>	<u>Behavioral Measures</u>
Standardized test scores	Attendance
Grade retention rate	Truancy rate
High School graduation rate	Out-of-school suspension rate
Two/Four year college acceptances	Expulsions
Post secondary participation one year after graduation	
Turnover by grade/gender/special needs/race/English Language Learners	
Student transfers	
Dropout Rate	
Class Size	
Expenditures per student	

In addition to the quantifiable measures above, each district will be required to report on their efforts to encourage parents to help their children become successful and on any other positive programs that the district has that affects its education community.

PART 2-RECOMMENDED OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISTRICTS THAT ARE NOT IMPROVING

SDE will develop state benchmarks for both academic and behavioral accountability. Based on these benchmarks, the state will provide a series of interventions for schools or districts that are consistently failing to progress on SDE initiated academic and behavioral benchmarks. These interventions, which will be available but not required until a school did not achieve its benchmarks for four consecutive years (including time that the school has been designated as in need of improvement), include:

- Development and implementation of a plan aligned to deficits in achievement as recommended in the instructional audit. Additionally, the district could participate in *School Wide Positive Behavior Support* or another SDE approved method to significantly improve the behavioral climate in the schools.
- Summer workshops for building principals aligned to areas needing improvement
- Planning to increase the level of parental engagement and participation
- Professional development for staff aligned to areas needing improvement
- Curriculum review and implementation of recommended curriculum with program resources

- Consultant improvement team made up of retired outstanding teachers and school leaders
- SDE consultant help
- Implementation of a school improvement plan developed by the principal, staff, and parent representatives which shall include, but not be limited to, an educational plan for each child, a school behavior program, and a clearly articulated curriculum
- School visit/inspection team as a culminating activity

For these schools, if SDE judges that the school or district has not improved; SDE could intervene and recommend that the district accept one, some or all of the above.

Before the state provides funding for these interventions, each such school district will have to conduct a performance appraisal. Each major part of the education process, including the instructional, financial and operational programs, will be included in the performance appraisal. Data to be analyzed in the performance appraisal could include: student achievements, including non-academic ones (such as an excellent music program), class size, quality of staff professional development, cost effectiveness of programs, overall expenditures and any other unique indicators that represent community values.

Based on the findings of the performance appraisal, and working collaboratively with the districts, SDE will directly ensure that instructional deficiencies are addressed and corrected. For financial and operational systemic inefficiencies, SDE will guide the districts on the creation of an appropriate corrective action plan.

PART 3-REQUIRED INTERVENTIONS FOR DISTRICTS THAT HAVE NOT IMPROVED OVER TIME

Any school district that fails to meet the SDE academic and behavioral benchmarks for at least four consecutive years will be designated an underperforming school district and will be subject to intensified supervision.

As a first step and at the direction and supervision of SDE, each such district will be required to an intensive fiscal and instructional audit for all of its schools. This audit will identify achievement deficits. Recommendations to correct these deficiencies will be included in the final report to SDE and the district. The fiscal audit will identify possible programmatic savings that could pay for the academic plan's implementation.

In addition, the State Department of Education will be empowered to:

- (1) Assign a technical assistance team to a district that will guide district initiatives and report progress to the Commissioner.
- (2) Direct a district to develop and implement a plan aligned to deficits in achievement as recommended in the instructional audit. Additionally, each district will be required to participate in *School Wide Positive Behavior Support* or another SDE approved method to significantly improve the behavioral climate in the schools.
- (3) Require additional training and technical assistance for central office staff, paraprofessionals, teachers and principals.
- (4) Require implementation of designated new or revised curricula.
- (5) Require a plan to encourage extensive parental involvement in schools
- (6) Direct the expenditure of state or federal funds to critical need areas and may require a board of education expend such funds as directed.
- (7) Work collaboratively with local unions and the Boards of Education to discuss providing monetary incentives to individual teachers or principals and/or directing the transfer and assignment of teachers and principals.

PART 4-WHEN SDE RESCUE EFFORTS HAVE NOT BEEN EFFECTIVE

Even after SDE intervenes with the Part 3 requirements, it is possible that some districts will still need stronger measures to help them succeed.

Such efforts will be considered on a case-by-case basis when all other efforts have not yielded positive results. These interventions include, but will not be limited to, the following:

- (1) Identify schools that can be reconstituted and may be managed by an entity other than the board of education in the school district where the school is located.
- (2) Replace, as appropriate, the leadership at the district and school level from the Board of Education to the superintendent to the school principals.
- (3) Provide from existing local education resources adequate funds to support voluntary public school enrollment in another district or additional interventions.
- (4) Assumption of control/management of the district by SDE.

The last intervention, state takeover, would only be implemented if the Governor, the General Assembly and the State Board of Education all agree that was the most appropriate option. If considered, the General Assembly, during a regular legislative session, could use the legislative bill process to initiate the takeover. This would include a public hearing with the committees of cognizance (such as the Education Committee) and the district's elected representatives and senators. When the General Assembly was not in session, the Governor, in an emergency, could call the General Assembly into session to consider takeover legislation.