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My name is Alex Johnston, and I am the Executive Director of ConnCAN, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now. I am testifying today in support of

HOUSE BILL NO. 5676: AN ACT CONCERNING CHILDREN OF FAMILIES WITH SERVICE NEEDS

Inspired by the breakthrough success of a number of Connecticut's urban public schools in dramatically raising student achievement, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN) was established two years ago with the ambitious goal of ensuring that every child in our state has access to a great public school.

Since then we have worked with parents and community leaders throughout the state to understand the challenges facing Connecticut's public schools. We have also worked with innovative public school leaders to better understand the elements of their success and what these lessons teach us about the effort to raise student achievement more broadly in their districts and across the state. Along the way there has been much to learn, but one constant throughout has been the urgency of closing Connecticut's achievement gap, the largest gap of any public school system in the nation—a gap that falls along all the fault lines of our society, including race, ethnicity, class and geography.

Drawing on the lessons learned from great public schools across Connecticut, the insights and experiences of parents and community leaders tackling this challenge, and the latest research on proven policies for raising student achievement from around the country, ConnCAN has recently released "Great Schools For All" a policy agenda presenting five big ideas for closing the nation's largest achievement gap in this report (available online at www.conncan.org)

Testifying today in favor of House Bill 5676, I'd like to focus particularly on the educational challenges faced by truant children and other "status offenders" who have violated court orders. While these children comprise nearly 1,000 of the more than 100,000 students suffering from Connecticut's achievement gap, ultimately, academic progress comes one child at a time, and this bill will make important steps in stabilizing the educational experience of some of our most vulnerable students.

Creating a comprehensive suite of services offered through family resource centers at the community level—services tailored to reach young people at risk BEFORE they become further involved with the court system just makes sense. Connecticut already has the second highest rate of juvenile incarceration for Hispanic males of any state in the nation, and the third highest for African American young men—along with the nation's largest achievement gap. Building on best practices that are already getting results in diverting youth from judicial involvement in other states such as New York and Florida, House Bill 5676 makes an important step forward for Connecticut by offering the prospect of dramatically improved educational and life outcomes for some of our most vulnerable youth. I urge members of the Judiciary Committee to support its passage.