

THE DISCOVERY CENTER

Connecticut General Assembly

Joint Education Committee – Public Hearing

March 10, 2008

12:00 pm in Room 2E of the LOB

Item 15. S.B. No 610 (Raised an act concerning a grant to a tax exempt organization with a mission to reduce cultural, socio – economic and racial isolation in the educational system.

Presenters for The Discovery Center: Amy Hines – Chairperson of the Board, Fernando Betancourt – Executive Director of Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, Allan Wilson – Executive Director

Presenter: Amy Hines

Honorable Co- Chair Senator Gaffey and Honorable Co- Chair Representative Fleischman and distinguished members of the Joint Education Committee my name is Amy Hines; I am the Chairperson of The Discovery Center board of directors. I am joined by Fernando Betancourt – Executive Director of the Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission & Allan Wilson – Executive Director of The Discovery Center. Thank you for allowing us to present to you today.

We are here today to encourage your support of item 15: an act concerning a grant to a tax exempt organization with a mission to reduce cultural, socio – economic and racial isolation in the education system. The Discovery Center has been a tax exempt organization since 2002 and I have been chairperson of the board since 2006.

I am proud to inform you and other members of the joint education committee that the Discovery Center has made significant and well documented progress in solving two of the most compelling educational issues facing public education in the state of Connecticut – Namely racial, cultural and socio – economic isolationism and the achievement gap.

Founded in 1992 at The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Ashford, CT by Paul Newman, The Discovery Center has been a private financed effort to inform, educate and prepare students fro a diverse world and to shape positive attitudes about race and differences.

I am here today to encourage you to support S. B. No. 610 and a grant to The Discovery Center in a pilot partnership with the State of Connecticut to take positive steps forward in fulfilling goals of integration for the city of Hartford, Manchester and East Hartford schools and the surrounding communities and use this as a basis to bring to other regions of the state of Connecticut.

The Discovery Center is an award winning program that emphasizes both systemic change and academic achievement. Since 2002 over 5,400 students have participated in the program. Our program brings 4th, 5th and 6th grade students from Connecticut's urban centers and surrounding rural/suburban communities together for a year round diversity, teambuilding experience with a focus on math, science and language arts curriculum. The core program takes place during the academic year and culminates with a residential experience at a neutral site – Camp Woodstock in Woodstock, CT. Camp Woodstock is a YMCA camp that has a stellar record and meets state standards of health and safety codes.

The Discovery Center utilizes Howard Gardner's educational approach of Multi – Intelligences and follows all state educational standards in teaching the math, science and language arts curriculum.

The Discovery Center managed by a committed and dedicated board of directors and receives guidance from an advisory board. This governance includes yearly filings of 990's, audits and proper documents with the Connecticut attorney generals office. There is also strict and in -depth reports filed each year along with visitations from the State of Connecticut Department of Education and CREC. The Discovery Center also prepares and submits nearly 20 annul reports to foundations both public and private to receive continued funding.

We are approaching the State of Connecticut at this time because we are experiencing unprecedented interest from different schools districts and want to request consideration and approval of a \$300,000 pilot partnerships grant, \$150,000 for each fall and spring sessions, that when combined with a CREC grant will pay one- half of the expenses for another 1,200 students to participate in the program for 2008 - 2009 academic year. The Discovery Center has had a long history of successful fund raising and would be able to raise from private and public foundations and individuals another \$300,000 per session for a total of \$600,000 to cover the cost of the program.

There is an additional reason we feel this program would benefit the State of Connecticut.

We have had experience with having students and their parents who have participated in The Discovery Center program over three years actually seek out multicultural education and apply and then attend Magnet Schools. The Discovery Center proposes that with this grant a coordinated effort be designed to continue this effort to inform, educate and prepare students and parents from the inner city and rural/ suburban schools to attend a magnet school of their choice. With the funding The Discovery Center would have a pool of 700 -800 students and their parents who would be eligible to apply and attend Magnet Schools. This would help solve the on going concern of increasing the pool of interested students and parents from suburban districts primarily, but also the urban centers.

Through a planned program of parent and student information sessions, presentations to schools boards and school committees and appropriate educational leaders students and parents would be prepared to attend The Discovery Center and eventually apply to a magnet school of their choice.

This effort would also help suburban and rural schools districts understand the importance of increasing the number of Open Choice opportunities for students from the urban centers.

The concepts is to Educate before Implement and prepare students and parents for a diverse world.

Presenter: Fernando Betancourt - Executive Director Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission.

Comments would focus of the following areas:

Importance of the program to the Latino community - Number of Latino students served - Benefits and Success.

- For the 2007 to 2008 academic year over 200 Latino students participated in The Discovery Center program. Supporting this bill would bring the total to over 400 students for 2008 - 2009.
- This is a program that would be brought to other areas of the state and have tremendous impact in preparing students for a diverse world.

Presenter: Allan Wilson - Executive Director

Thank you for allowing me to provide insight into The Discovery Center program. I have witness the effect of this program starting back in 1997 when I served a Director of Development of The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp. I witnessed first hand how students attitudes and approach to one other changed when guided by trained and professionals in a neutral setting at a time when young people are forming their values and determining how to get along with each other.

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There has been a continual process of evaluations over the history of The Discovery Center. Starting in the fall of 2006 The Discovery Center had an independent research and data analysis firm visit the camp, review surveys and talk to teachers and students to determine the effectiveness of the program.

There are many findings and I will highlight a few.

- In 2006 fall over 95% of the students who had participated in the program indicated they would treat other better.
- Fully 74% in the same study reported that had better social skills.
- After the introduction of the math, science and language arts curriculum survey, teacher comments and students interest level in academic achievement significantly improved.

The concept to Educate before Implement has been reviewed by the CT Department of Educational Equity and CREC and received positive reviews and comments.

At the present time The Discovery Center serves schools in Hartford – seven schools, Manchester – two schools, Scotland, Wethersfield, East Windsor, East Hartford, Franklin and Enfield.

There has been considerable interest in the program for 2008 – 2009 from Glastonbury, Suffield, Woodstock, Torrington, Cornwall, East ford.

This pilot partnership will make a difference and bring students, parents and educational leaders together to eliminate fears, and build trust between individuals from different racial, cultural and socio – economic groups.

A more detailed description of The Discovery Center and the initiative Educate before Initiative has been given to the clerks and I do hope you have had a chance to review it.
Thank you for your consideration.