TESTIMONY – Senate Bill 944
Monday, March 9, 2009

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee,

Good afternoon!

My name is Mike Rafferty and I live in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. I am speaking today as a Connecticut citizen, as a father of five, as a grandfather of fourteen grandchildren, and as a compassionate and passionate educator.

I have been a public school educator for forty-one years and I have no plans for retirement as I am still committed to academic excellence and the emotional well being of the students in Connecticut. I am the immediate past president of the Connecticut Association of Schools.

I have been an educator in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and I have been a principal in Connecticut since November, 1990. My wife and I moved here because of the Connecticut educational system for our children and for my professional growth. Connecticut was ranked as the number one in state educational status... unfortunately, we are no longer considered on the top.

I was a principal outside of Boston and came here to open up the new Old Saybrook Middle School in 1990... a 600 student school with grades 4 – 8. Through outstanding curricula design, dedicated teachers, wonderful professional development for our staff, and strong community support, our school has received countless awards. Our students are successful in the classroom (measured in part by our CMTs) and outside of the classroom in many school activities. Funding has helped, of course, but the commitment and involvement of our community has strengthened our school system.

We all know there are inconsistencies within our local school systems... and there are two Connecticuts... the suburban communities ... and the inner cities (designated as priority districts). In the past few years the "richer" communities could provide solid curricula, small class sizes, new textbooks and instructional supplies, AND solid professional development... those days seem to be declining due to the economic crisis effecting local budgets. There is grave concern if the students from these communities will continue to grow academically in the same manner as in the past. YET – we know that our inner city priority schools do not have the same curricula, same class size, same professional development nor instructional support... what is going to happen within this economic crisis to these students?

The educational gaps keep getting bigger and bigger. What are we doing as responsible adults to eliminate the inconsistencies?

The State has had to embrace No Child Left Behind - a federal government mandate that is grossly underfunded. We now have more requirements... the new national Response to Interventions (RtI) with our State model named Scientific Research-Based Initiatives (known as SRBI). This is a very positive instructional model for schools ... but local school districts will need even more funding for staff, professional development, and instructional supplies. When the financial situation is getting more precarious we are asked to do more with less!

We have an extremely serious dilemma... it is appropriate for every student in the State of Connecticut to receive an equal education AND the best education as possible. We know that the citizens in our State want our schools to solve all of the children's social, emotional, familial problems while budgets in social services are being cut, also. With all of the cuts at the State/local level, how can education solve all of the societal/educational problems??????? We KNOW we cannot.

I consider this is a MORAL ISSUE for every citizen in the State. How is the legislature going to ensure quality education, and an equal and appropriate educational programming for all students? I ask humbly that you support the Secondary School Reform proposal... I ask that you earmark federal stimulus grants to go into this exemplary proposed secondary school reform plan. We have for the first time since I have been in Connecticut a real plan that addresses middle school and high school students (this is the first time middle school students – our pre-adolescent and adolescent students – have actually been named in a plan). Our Commissioner of Education has worked tirelessly for the past two years with members of the State Department of Education and many stakeholders in our State to present a well-developed secondary school reform package that is also financially responsible. The Connecticut Plan addresses all aspects of students' needs... and stresses the importance of Engagement, 21st Century Skills, and RIGOR! We need to be the best again!!!!! The program will stretch our 12 to 18 year old students with curricular offerings, Student Success Plans, and Capstone Projects at the 8th and 12th grades. This plan addresses the need for increase State standards while helping to decrease the academic gaps among our students throughout the State.

It is truly the time for Connecticut students – all students regardless of their familial socio-economical status – to receive the education they deserve. And we need to bring back Connecticut as the best in the country. Not for the people in this chamber.... not for the devoted teachers in the classroom... but for every individual student in every classroom in the State of Connecticut.

Thank you for listening.