

Testimony of Alex Johnston, CEO ConnCAN
to the
Government Administration and Elections Committee
Public Hearing March 16, 2009

Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Spallone and members of the Committee. My name is Alex Johnston, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now. I am here this morning to speak in favor of the continued operation of the Connecticut Commission on Children, and therefore I am speaking in opposition to the provision of Senate Bill 840 that would eliminate the Commission.

So, why is it especially important, even in this time of severe budget difficulties in Connecticut, to retain the Commission on Children in an operable state?

Connecticut's Commission on Children is a national model for coordinating public and private efforts to benefit children on a statewide basis. The Commission has been recognized in numerous national settings for this trail-blazing work, and it delivers these benefits at a remarkably modest cost. As Executive Director Elaine Zimmerman testified before the Appropriations Committee in February, the annual budget works out to just one dollar and thirty cents for every child in the state.

Let's do the math here. We are spending well over \$10,000 dollars per child on average to educate children in public schools across the state. For about 1/100th of one percent of that cost, we can have the Commission functioning in a vital role of studying the impact of these huge public expenditures, and working collaboratively with stakeholders across the spectrum to develop innovative policies that deliver maximum benefit for the public resources we are already committing to our state's children.

I'll cite just one example with which I am familiar, which is the role that the Commission recently played in publicly identifying the very concerning declines in early reading scores in Connecticut, and then in taking a leadership role in devising solutions working with the Commissioner of Education, policy experts from around Connecticut and the nation. The result, among other things has been a new state policy that as of this summer will make Connecticut one of just three states in the nation to require incoming elementary school teachers to demonstrate proficiency in the latest evidence-based techniques for reading instruction.

These kinds of policy innovations have the promise to deliver results for generations of Connecticut children. The Commission has also been a national leader in the arena of parent leadership and training, through flagship initiatives such as the nationally recognized Parent Leadership and Training Institute whose graduates in communities across the state are playing a vital role of civic engagement on behalf of children's interests at every level of our government.

And then of course there is the instrumental role that the Commission has played in helping to bring grant funding to the state from both foundations and the federal government. In this dire fiscal climate this role is likely to be more important than ever as the federal government embarks on an unprecedented stimulus initiative in which a significant portion of the funding will be disbursed on a competitive basis requiring states to demonstrate the kind of policy innovation and cross sector collaboration which the Commission on Children has excelled at catalyzing.

For all these reasons, I urge you to support the Commission on Children and its capacity to maintain its operations at a viable level moving forward.