

New Haven Public Schools

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Dr. Reginald Mayo
Superintendent
Administrative Offices
Gateway Center
54 Meadow Street^{1st} floor
New Haven, CT
203-946-8888

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON H.B. 5491, AAC CERTAIN SCHOOL DISTRICT REFORMS TO REDUCE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Senator Gaffey, Rep. Fleischmann, members of the Education Committee, my name is Donna Aiello, Coordinator of Staff Development for New Haven Public Schools, and I am here to testify regarding H.B. 5491, AAC Certain School District Reforms to Reduce the Achievement Gap in Connecticut.

The issue of school reform and closing the achievement gap is of upmost importance to our community. As you may know, New Haven has undertaken a massive school reform effort. Over the past year and a half, the district has been hard at work to lay the groundwork to implement our School Change Initiative. We have negotiated a groundbreaking contract with our teachers and worked closely with parents, teachers and administrators on the details of our plan to close the achievement gap in five years, cut the dropout rate in half, and make sure that ALL of our children are academically and financially able to go to college. This planning work has prepared us to move forward with perhaps the most visible aspect of the initiative: tiering our schools.

As luck would have it, today is the day the Mayor and Superintendent are announcing the first 6-8 schools to pilot the new tiering process. These pilot schools will begin implementing programs in the Fall of 2010. The remainder of the schools will be tiered by November 2010 and will begin new programming in the Fall of 2011. Mayor DeStefano and Dr. Mayo, our Superintendent of Schools, are both in the district today, speaking with the parents, staff and administrators at each of the pilot schools to explain how the process will work and to answer questions, they regret that they cannot be here today. I am here today to speak on their behalf.

House Bill No. 5491, An Act Concerning Certain School District Reforms to Reduce the Achievement Gap in Connecticut covers many topics, I would like to address them in the order they appear in the bill.

Our first concern is in regards to section 1(g) – also known as the “Parent Trigger.”

As I mentioned, our School Change Initiative is a collaborative effort between all facets of our community - the City, the Board of Education, administrators, teachers, unions, parents, and the nonprofit and business communities. We believe that this effort will not be successful unless all stakeholders have a seat at the table. We have engaged our parents at every stage of this process, from identifying how we will measure student success

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to the criteria we are using to tier our schools. Schools will be evaluated on how students perform on standardized tests, how the school is doing on improving student performance from year to year and the school environment. Tier I schools were those that were consistently high performing in all areas, Tier II had inconsistent or mix results, and Tier III were consistently low performing. High and mid-level schools will have the autonomy to implement new programming, such as changes to curriculum, or length of the school day or school year. Low performing schools will be "turned around" or reconstituted either by the district or by an outside charter management organization. Alternatively low performing schools may undergo intensive revisions to their current structure and programming.

Parents and other interested community members will also be directly involved in the planning for new programming in the schools once they are tiered.

While we applaud the intent of section 1(g) to give parents a voice and a remedy should their children attend a failing school – we are concerned that the bill in its current form may have some unintended consequences.

In its current draft, the bill proposes that should 51% of parents in a failing school sign a petition a "trigger" is activated for the school district to look at turning around, restarting or transforming school.

Our first concern is that this petition process is prone to pit parents against parents, parents against teachers and parents against the district. We believe that a more effective remedy would include a mechanism to generate dialogue between parents, teachers, and the district administrators about how to improve a school's performance. We believe the petition process creates a divide between the parents and school administrators if they do not agree on the recommendations of the petition. Additionally, under the trigger, parents who have mixed feelings about their child's school or questions do not have the means to express their views. This "all or nothing" approach could potentially turn parents against other parents, creating an adversarial atmosphere in schools. An additional concern is that the petition process does not consider the voice of future parents, or other community members.

In New Haven, we have established a Citywide PTO, with parent representation from every school. Parents, unions and district administrators have created an intervention system for failing schools based on agreed upon data and metrics. All parties have worked to ensure that the process is fair and transparent. We have agreed as a community to a common set of criteria to place our schools into one of three tiers. This spring we will add a new piece of data to our matrix for tiering the remainder of our schools in November. The district will send out school climate surveys to all parents, students, and teachers. The results in this survey will be incorporated in the multi-dimensional criteria used for the district wide tiering next November. These are just a couple examples of how the City has engaged all parents, and other community members, in constant communication about School Change, and has actively asked for feedback on how to not only better engage parents right now, but in the long term.

We are also concerned that this process allows outside interest groups to use the trigger as an opportunity to organize parents and push their own agenda. With the influence of interest groups in the mix, the intent or voice of the parents gets lost, and again the lines of communication are severed.

We are worried that should this bill pass in its current form, the process that we have worked so hard to create in New Haven would become obsolete. Parents can and should have a voice in their children's education. There are other reform efforts that can be instituted to ensure that parent's do have an active and influential voice.

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Section 2. We support the establishment of an income tax reimbursement pilot competitive grant program to reward teachers who agree to work longer school days and school years.

Section 3. We support the language in this section to improve the teacher evaluation system in Connecticut. Pursuant to the contract we negotiated with our teachers last fall, New Haven has established a committee comprised of teachers and administrators to develop a new teacher evaluation and development system. The final proposal will be announced by April 15 of this year. We do know that the new evaluation system will tie student progress and performance to teacher performance. The system we are developing is in line with the suggestions outlined in the bill.

Section 6. While we do not oppose the establishment of an online credit recovery program – we do see the bill in its current form as an unfunded mandate. The bill requires districts to designate, from existing staff, an online learning coordinator to administer and coordinate the online credit recovery program. The effective date of this bill is July 1, 2010. We are concerned about the short time frame and cost of creating a new program, position and training for that position with out additional funding and with only a few months before the new school year begins. We would ask that should this section pass, that the effective date be moved to 2011.

Section 9. We have serious concerns about the financial implications of this section. At the beginning of the school year, the district must determine the number of staff, the type of facilities and the number of courses it will offer to accommodate the number of enrolled students. School districts report the number of students enrolled in October, because this is the best time to capture the students who enrolled who actually show up to school on the first day, as well as students who did not preregister, but arrive shortly after school starts. Of course exact enrollment figures increase and decrease during the year. We receive additional students who transfer in from private, charter and other school districts. We also lose students. Some move, some transfer, some do drop out. However, even when a student leaves the district mid-year, the district's costs remain constant. We need the same amount of space, the same number of teachers and the same number of courses. Therefore, moving the resident student count to March would be very costly to districts.

I thank you for your time today and would be happy to answer any questions.