



**Connecticut Education
Association**

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***Testimony of Mary Loftus Levine, CEA Director of Policy and
Professional Practice***

Before the Education Committee on March 15, 2010

Raised H.B. No. 5489

An Act Concerning Secondary School Reform

Raised H.B. No. 5491

***An Act Concerning Certain School District Reforms to Reduce the
Achievement Gap in Connecticut***

Raised H.B. No. 5492

An Act Concerning Revisions to the Accountability Statutes

Raised H.B. No. 440

***An Act Concerning School Districts and Teacher Performance
Programs***

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Mary Loftus Levine, and I am the Director of Policy and Professional Practice for the Connecticut Education Association, representing over 40,000 members in our great public schools.

Rather than attempt to comment on all of the particulars of the myriad ideas and concepts before you today, we want the Committee to know the following:

CEA is in favor of sound school reform proposals which are:

1. systemic in nature;
2. grounded in irrefutable research; and
3. sustainable over the long term both fiscally as well as educationally.

We have played an active, proud part as stakeholders in not only the development of the Race to the Top grant, but for many, many years as educational leaders in our state. Next to parents and students, we are in fact the largest group of stakeholders, highly educated, in the classroom

every day, and who care deeply about our students and our profession. In fact, we have been begging for reforms to and adequate funding for public education for hundreds of years.

So what are we for?

Besides adequate funding, we want to work in schools for a society that respects our profession, that doesn't scapegoat teachers and their professional organization for all the ills of our society – which we deal with face to face on a daily basis, while we work hard to do our best. We too want parent involvement, high standards and accountability for all stakeholders – but not just for teachers. We want fair, unbiased, comprehensive evaluation systems, coupled with great professional development, based on sound research, both of which help us to improve our skills and knowledge – not systems which punish us or take away our livelihood because of factors we cannot control.

And what do we want for our students? We want the students in our urban centers to have the same opportunities for a great education that our wealthiest suburbs have. We know what works – and we're doing it every day. Our 8 CommPACT Schools (which you just heard about today) are just one example of a comprehensive, systemic, research-based, collaborative school model where all stakeholders, particularly parents, students and teachers, are the center of a learning model with proven, replicable results, if properly funded.

What we don't want is more unfunded mandates which end up in our lap, the inappropriate use of high stakes tests which in and of themselves are not reliable indicators, nor the adoption of politically charged quick fixes to very serious matters which will affect the education of our children for decades. We have to get it right this time. Our students deserve nothing less.



CEA Response to
The Connecticut Plan: Academic and Personal Success
for Every Middle and High School Student (October 2, 2008)

The Connecticut Plan sets our collective sights high. We are reaching high and far. The next challenge is for state leaders and policymakers to evaluate whether our reach exceeds our grasp in terms of state resources and long-term commitment.

The 41,000 teachers of the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) urge a realistic assessment of that commitment in order to ensure that educators will be well equipped – with regard to resources, class size, and professional development – as they embark on implementation of high school improvement in partnership with other stakeholders in educational excellence. It is critical that every classroom, in every building, in every school district should be included in this frank assessment, so that when we move ahead it will be on a level playing field of equal opportunity for all students.

As the high school plan moves into the legislative arena, we urge careful analysis and thoughtful examination. At this point in the high school reform effort, we urge the following improvements:

1. Provide and facilitate strong professional development components for educators based on research and best practices, including for new mentoring/advisory and Capstone programs.
2. Refine alternatives or individualized standards for students assessed as not being able to meet these new requirements with a focus on individualized support for underachieving students.
3. Set reasonable goals for high school graduation rates over time.
4. Create greater opportunities for smaller learning communities.
5. Develop strategies for early identification of potential dropouts.
6. Provide higher education tuition incentives, particularly for urban students.
7. Expand learning opportunities and connections with colleges and universities.
8. Provide greater access to technology.
9. Ensure that 21st century skills drive the development of curriculum and assessment.
10. Base assessments on benchmarks and growth models, providing additional time and necessary support systems; create local alternative assessments with diagnostic focus that are timely and useful to teachers and students.
11. Develop a model with a greater emphasis on parental and community support, responsibility, and education.
12. Share specifics of the plan cost analysis with broad audiences and solicit input to ensure adequacy.

One of the most serious challenges facing this plan is the current and future condition of our economy. We cannot afford to continue trying to "go to the moon in a 747." We feel the cost projections provided are grossly underestimated. Here are four straightforward examples:

1. Student Success Plans – Cannot be implemented by simply hiring one additional teacher. Time, staffing, program development, training, scheduling, and structural/space issues need to be considered to provide quality programs. Adding this assignment to the workload of guidance personnel is a recipe for inadequacy.
2. Capstone Project – Although 40% of districts reportedly may already offer a similar project now, releasing and re-assigning current staff will likely need to occur. Specifically, one teacher per school is insufficient. SSP teachers/mentors would also need to be involved and follow a student for 4 years.
3. Professional Development – This critical piece calls for training of one teacher per high school off site, and one participant for new technology training. Not only is this insufficient, professional development needs to be done on site and in small groups to achieve transfer of learning in an effective way.
4. End-of-Course Exams – There are added burdens at the local level in the areas of training for scoring, time re-allocations and data collection services. Creating a reliable and valid system within and among districts poses a genuine challenge.

(over)

Other questions and details need to be seriously considered, discussed, and addressed, such as:

1. Construction costs to build and/or redesign school buildings into new 21st century facilities (e.g. virtual labs, science labs, areas to create and deliver projects, work in collaborative teams, etc.).
2. Redesign schedules, job descriptions, reconfigure transportation, provide technology, books, materials, and resources.

Further comments on Oct. 2, 2008 Plan

The inclusion of the middle school years in the plan is a very positive step in the right direction. We commend this move and hope that the state will continue to drill down even further, using the latest brain research available, to expand resources for early childhood initiatives. The research clearly demonstrates that dollars spent in the early years of a child's education produce results.

The Connecticut Plan for High School Reform, although based on many sound concepts, appears to be driven by an over-emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) courses. While we all recognize the need to enhance these critical areas, not all students are, in fact, going to focus their careers in these areas. In essence, the plan's emphasis seems to be based on what was once considered a "college prep" program. The plan would be insufficient if it favored one career path over another. Policymakers need to be cognizant of the importance of vocational and technical pursuits, as well as the humanities and a broad range of career paths.

End-of-course exams are recommended to count for 20% of a student's final grade. Involved in the plan are a model state-developed curriculum, coupled with these mandated tests. This raises concerns about a "one size fits all" approach. Teachers fear that curriculum narrowing, at the expense of the arts and other pursuits will continue as we move to more state mandates.

We currently witness on a daily basis the results of high-stakes testing in our schools. As has been said frequently in recent years, simply taking a student's academic temperature will not cure what ails him or her. We have societal and economic gaps in educational opportunity, access and resources. These demand the attention of policymakers because our achievement gaps do not exist in isolation from other societal and economic problems. Along these lines, we feel this plan does not go far enough in addressing societal forces such as housing, institutional segregation practices, parental involvement and support, jobs, economic opportunity for families, and health concerns -- all of which have a clear impact on student success.

This plan contemplates "embedding" 21st century skills into each curriculum, as well as forming the basis for the required Capstone Project. We believe that 21st century skills should not simply be add-ons or used as evidence for one project. Using these skills as the philosophical basis for the plan would have been a more appropriate application. Any curriculum which is developed should reflect these skills at its core. This plan will rise or fall in the area of curriculum development. Disadvantaged districts will benefit greatly from any resources provided to develop strong curriculum, along with accompanying high-quality staff development and training from the State Department of Education.

Closing caution

While the above comments are not in any way exhaustive, we urge all stakeholders, including the public, our legislators, and leaders at all levels, to be cognizant of all aspects of the plan before us, as well as any probable unintended consequences of what appears to be a shift to a model of stronger statewide control of Connecticut's secondary schools.

We have all seen the impact of NCLB, a federal system driven by high-stakes testing, a one-size-fits-all approach, and serious underfunding. We have seen other states move away from end-of-course exams when dropout rates began to soar. Any reform of the magnitude of the Connecticut Plan needs to be based on sound research of what works, not experiments in other states or comparisons with countries with homogeneous populations. Perhaps strong consideration should be given to statewide funding of public education to accompany the proposed state mandates.

Our students need and deserve strong, safe, effective 21st century schools that provide the best education possible. Our fear is that we will once again end up with more standards, more mandates, and more experiments -- without the funding, support, and resources necessary to do what really works.

Submitted on October 7, 2008

