

Testimony of Gwendolyn Samuel – Meriden CT
Before the Education Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
Public Hearing, February 23, 2011

Good Morning Chairs Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischman, and members of the Education Committee, I thank you for this opportunity to testify about House Bill 6324.

My name is Gwen Samuel. I am a mother of four and I live in Meriden, Connecticut. I have 2 young adults aged 20 and 22, both of whom were high school drop outs, but because “staying a drop out” wasn’t an option, one went back to high school and got a high school diploma and one went to JobCorp, received his GED, and multiple life skills certifications. Now my focus is on the younger two in elementary and middle school. These are very critical years for all of my children: 2 young adults trying to find steady employment, my youngest child beginning her standardized testing/CMTs phase of life, and one in middle school/pre-adult years preparing for high school and hopefully graduating high school with college ready and effective life coping skills. My role as a parent is to ensure I maintain a supportive and stable home environment and to support efforts to ensure effective teachers are attracted to and retained in their classrooms, thus creating a trajectory for an improved quality of life for my children and others in my community.

House Bill 6324 brings up the very important question of how teachers can be laid off in a budget crisis, such as the one we find ourselves dealing with right now. But as it stands, the bill does not really change how layoffs can happen, because it does not end the practice of basing layoffs only on seniority.

We need to make sure the budget crisis does not hurt our children any more than it needs to. It is sad to realize that we will see teacher layoffs this year, but if they must be done, we need to make sure they are done in a way that puts the needs of our children first. Just because a teacher has been teaching for a long time doesn’t mean they’re more effective than a new teacher. There are many more new teachers in schools attended by our low-income children and children of color than in other schools, so when you lay off only the newest teachers, whose children do you hurt the most? It doesn’t make sense to let these teachers go just because they have less time on the job, especially when some of them are our most effective teachers. It’s not fair to the students, to the communities, or to the teachers. We just cannot afford this when we already have the biggest achievement gap in the country—we should be doing everything we can to keep the best teachers in their classrooms, for the sake of our children.

The proposed bill could be improved by giving districts relief from seniority based layoffs this year, when it matters the most. We should at least give relief to districts where the students are already the farthest behind, such as the districts in corrective action. The parents and students I talk to every day in communities around Connecticut know that without changes to these layoff decisions, our children will fall even further behind. Without some changes to the language in this proposed bill, no real relief on teacher layoffs will be seen by any districts in Connecticut, which is the worst possible result for our children.

I know how important great teachers have been to my children, and that's why I believe we need to change how layoffs happen this year. In partnership with parents, great teachers can make all the difference in children's lives, and I can't imagine how damaging it will be if some of those teachers are let go this year just because they have been teaching for less time. This is about the future of our state and about treating teachers with the respect they deserve as our partners in building Connecticut's future and giving all children an opportunity to succeed in life.

Let me be very clear, I fully understand you face tough choices because your education public policy decisions have a direct correlation to the economic viability of our state. The CGA Commerce Committee stated there are five areas to address to help stabilize CT.

- *EDUCATION – the driver of a qualified workforce
- *Cost of Doing Business in CT
- *Housing – ensuring there is sufficient affordable housing to support job growth
- *Transportation - Supporting efficient Commuter efforts
- *Energy cost

I think we can all agree that closing our achievement gap and giving all students a great start through their education is important not only for children, but for Connecticut's continued economic success. We need to intervene this year so that the teacher layoffs that happen are not based only on teacher seniority, so that the children in the communities I speak to every day aren't unfairly hurt by the budget crisis.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Gwen Samuel