

Education Committee Public Hearing – March 7, 2011

Testimony by Dacia Toll, President of Achievement First

Good afternoon, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Stillman and members of the Education Committee meeting. My name is Dacia Toll, and I am the President of Achievement First, which supports four public charter schools in the state of Connecticut – Amistad and Elm City in New Haven, Achievement First Hartford, and Achievement First Bridgeport – collectively serving 2,500 Connecticut students. The schools Achievement First operates are amongst only a handful in the entire state where low-income, minority students selected by lottery are out-performing state averages on achievement tests – providing powerful examples that our state’s vexing achievement gap can, in fact, be closed. I am here today to speak enthusiastically in favor of Senate Bill 1104 and to propose three amendments for you to consider that I believe would clarify and strengthen the language.

First, let me be clear that this bill in no way lowers the standards for educators in Connecticut – in fact, in a powerful way, it actually raises the standard to what we know our students need and deserve – it provides them with an effective teacher, not simply a teacher who has put in the required seat time in school of education courses. At Achievement First, we greatly value teacher effectiveness – in fact, we believe the success of our schools and our scholars is the direct result of the priority we have placed on recruiting, developing, evaluating, celebrating, and retaining effective teachers and leaders. In fact, we have received national recognition for many of these practices, including recently being awarded a very competitive grant by the U.S. Department of Education based on our teacher evaluation practices and being selected by the Aspen Institute as one of two best practices for their urban superintendents group.

Unfortunately, we have found the current state certification regulations to be a real challenge and to not be a sound proxy for teacher effectiveness. Dr. Tom Kane and other researchers from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education have actually studied this exact question and, in two separate papers, cite “a growing body of research” that suggests “certification of teachers bears little relationship to teacher effectiveness,” as measured by impacts on students’ achievement.¹

Currently, state law requires that 100% of teachers in a charter school be certified under Connecticut regulations. We have found that teachers with years of successful experience in

¹ *Evidence from New York City* was published in March 2006 and followed a month later by *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job*. “There are effective certified teachers and there are ineffective certified teachers; similarly, there are effective uncertified teachers and ineffective uncertified teachers,” the authors of *Identifying Effective Teachers* write. “The differences between the stronger teachers and the weaker teachers only become clear once teachers have been in the classroom for a couple of years.” This is why we are advocating against pre-employment certification compliance and arguing in favor of evaluating actual teacher performance after several years on the job – which is precisely what Kane and other researchers recommend.

another state or country are in a number of circumstances forced by the State of CT to take basic education graduate courses and, in some cases, even undergraduate courses. For AF teachers and instructional staff, these requirements for unnecessary coursework come on top of participating in AF's extended day and year, and taking part in AF's extensive, required teacher training and evaluation programs. Over the years, we have worked hard to come into compliance with this law, and many of our teachers and leaders have spent considerable time and money on additional coursework that added little to their effectiveness but got them the required piece of paper. Unfortunately, we still have some very effective teachers and leaders that are being told that they need to meet requirements they cannot meet, including in some cases being asked to return to school full-time in order to comply – and neither they nor their students can afford to lose them from the classroom. If they fail to comply, we are being told by the State Department of Education that we need to fire them. We are in an untenable situation, and we are grateful that the Committee is considering a more rational alternative. The loss of high quality teachers and leaders would have a significant negative impact on the academic success of AF's Connecticut students.

It is notable that this proposal is restricted only to charter schools. The core of the charter model has often been characterized as increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability – an explicit acknowledgement on the part of the state that these innovative schools should be freed from some regulation to show if better results are possible with new paradigms. We are more than willing to be accountable for outcomes. However, Connecticut's current law does not provide any flexibility on certification. As a point of comparison, Massachusetts, which has on most national assessments the highest-performing traditional and charter schools in the country, does not require any charter school staff to be certified. New York, Illinois, North Carolina, and many other states require only a portion of a charter school's staff to be certified. Several other states allow a charter to apply for a waiver of certification requirements.

As someone who has worked a great deal on this issue, I would ask that the Committee support the spirit of this bill and consider three amendments to the current proposed language.

- First, the current language includes a "good cause" standard. I am not sure what was intended by this standard, but I do worry that it will be subject to considerable administrative discretion. I believe the intention of the bill drafters was to allow for highly effective teachers to teach in Connecticut, and I would recommend that the standard for a waiver be limited to that.
- Second, the current language speaks only to effective teachers. Unfortunately, the challenges we have faced getting talented educators certified in the state extend to school leaders and other school personnel. For example, we have promoted a number of our most talented teachers to become Academic Deans (effectively assistant principals), and we have provided them with considerable training and support so that they can serve as outstanding coaches for our teachers. We have also had these Deans evaluating the teachers they coach, which is increasingly seen as a best practice in education – and it has certainly worked for us in terms of both student achievement and teacher satisfaction. However, again, we are being told by the State Department that these Academic Deans do not possess the relevant administrative

certification to provide this support to teachers. I would ask that the Committee expand the language in the current bill to prioritize effectiveness in every position that we have working with our students – “a person providing instruction, pupil services, supervision of instruction or supervision of pupil services” -- and to clarify that an administrator who has had requirements waived because of proven effectiveness be allowed to evaluate teachers.

- Third, all charter school staff in certified positions are eligible to participate in the Teacher’s Retirement Board program, and we would want to make sure that any teacher who received a waiver for effectiveness would not be penalized with respect to his or her retirement.

Thank you for considering this bill and my suggestions. Without some flexibility on certification regulations, we are at serious risk of compromising the very practices that have made our schools work so powerfully for students. Our students in Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven need the best possible teachers we can find for them, and we are grateful that this Committee is considering ways to help us continue to do right by them.