



Center for Social Research

Strengthening communities through research

260 Girard Avenue, Hartford CT 06105

860.768.5614 | csr@centerforsocialresearch.org

Testimony of Marcia Hughes
Center for Social Research, University of Hartford
260 Girard Ave, Hartford, CT 06105

**Prepared for the Appropriations Committee Public Hearing regarding
the Governor's Proposed Midterm Budget Adjustments**
Public Hearing: February 17, 2012

Dropping out of school is not a single event but rather is a long-term process that begins very early in a child's school career and has to do with the relationship the child (and family) have with the school. The origins and course of school failure – truancy, poor attendance, poor academic progress, and behavioral issues – often begin in the first grade (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Longitudinal studies have found that children's school trajectories (e.g., drop out) are established by the third grade (Entwistle & Alexander, 1988; Alexander et al., 1995). Since students who eventually drop out of school begin distancing themselves at such a young age, it is the early phases of the relationship between children/families and schools that are critical. This is the "sensitive period" during which the skills, behaviors, and attitudes critical to school success are developed (Bornstein, 1989; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Resources for promoting positive school experiences and outcomes, and preventing drop-out, therefore, will be the most effective if directed toward elementary-aged children and families.

The Family/School Connection, a program of the Children's Trust Fund, a division of Department of Social Services, provides home visitation and support services for families of children who have been identified as having truancy, academic, and/or behavioral issues. *The goals of the program are to improve parenting skills and help families become more involved with their children's educational experiences.* Services are provided at six schools across the state (Hartford, New Haven, Middletown, Willimantic, and 2 in Norwich). Children, ages 4 to 14 are referred to the program for chronic tardiness (28%) and truancy (15%) as well as for issues related to behavior (53%) and academics (39%). During the 2010-2011 school year, 230 children were enrolled. It is important to note that approximately 70% of these children were in Pre-K through the third grades.

For children and family participants of Family/School Connection, the child is likely to experience a discontinuity between home and school. Some of these parents may lack decent or adequate housing and may not even be able to provide the basics of safety and health. Parents may experience high levels of stress due to financial hardships and unpredictability and have little energy left for parenting. Some of the families may also

be experiencing problems such as domestic violence, substance abuse, relational problems, and mental illness. Under these circumstances family members may have feelings of shame, fear, and anger, all of which increase the chances of child abuse and neglect. These factors, individually and combined, become the context for how the child learns, thinks, feels, and acts, and for what to expect for him/herself and from others.

The first step in the intervention is to engage these families and develop a working relationship over time that is built on trust. Families are approached in a holistic manner: the focus is to learn more about the child and the family, and gain an understanding of their circumstances and what limits their involvement. In order to identify and help to solve issues, Home Visitors visit families on a regular basis. They work with the families to improve parenting skills, more generally, and specifically help parents to understand their role in their child's schooling. They also support families (and the school) by linking parents and families to the school's services and programs. Because of the multiple issues that these families often face, Home Visitors use a two generation approach - they emphasize support for the mothers' development issues as well as the children's - and they include support for other relevant family members whenever possible, especially the fathers. Therefore, a major role of the Home Visitors is to help the mother and individual family members obtain resources and connect to community services and agencies when needed.

No one can argue that family background has a significant influence on a child's school success. Family background is critical: basic obligations of families include providing for children's health and safety and building home conditions that support school learning and behavior. Families may need assistance to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for understanding their children at each grade level with home visitors, family support programs and forms of education, training, and information giving; providing information on how to help their children at home by providing information on skills required of students to pass each grade. The Family School Connection provides these critical services to families. Making cuts in these services is misguided. It withdraws badly needed support in areas that need them the most.

Thank you,

Marcia Hughes, P.h.D.
Assistant Director
Center for Social Research
ph. (860) 768-5694
mhughes@hartford.edu