

# *New Haven Public Schools*

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## **TESTIMONY BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON PROVISIONS IN HB 5350, AN ACT CONCERNING ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL LITERACY BY GRADE THREE**

Senator Stillman, Rep. Fleischmann, members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony to your committee on certain provisions in HB 5350, *An Act Concerning Achieving Universal Literacy by Grade Three*.

We have been working diligently to improve literacy in New Haven, using our District Improvement Plan and School Improvement Plans as vehicles to do so. We have utilized data to measure student progress and the effectiveness of our interventions. We have continued to retain tutors for students, even after State funding for reading intervention services in grades K-3 was cut. We run extensive summer school programs targeted at students most in need of help. Our School Change Initiative, with its emphasis on a portfolio of schools, talent and the community, links with our improvement work.

With our experiences in recent years and our School Change efforts, we are excited about opportunities to improve education offered during this legislative session. We support much of HB 5350; it seems to hearken to Scientific Research-Based Instruction (SRBI), which we already do. However, we do have concerns about several provisions of the bill, chiefly involving funding for several intervention efforts, as set forth below.

- Intensive accelerated reading classes are linked in Secs. 1(13), 3(12) and 8, along with additional summer school and the retention of any student in grade three who does not achieve a satisfactory score on the reading component of the CMT. We are in agreement with the goals but are concerned about implementation. Does a “satisfactory” score on the CMT mean “proficient”? If so, then we will need additional help – i.e., more staff and funding to hire that staff – to conduct more interventions. We pay for some tutors but will need more. We understand that there may be a reduced teacher-student ratio but that may require more teachers and classrooms; there also could be space issues for the “transitional instructional setting” as outlined in Sec. 8(b)(2). Finally, while we run an active and effective summer school program, the new standard means additional summer school students – which means hiring more teachers, support staff and paying to keep buildings open.

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- Incentives for teachers and schools that have demonstrated significant reading improvement in student reading are linked in Secs. 1(10) and 18. The incentives are to be established by the Commissioner of Education and there is a list of items for teachers that may be included, such as performance bonuses, in Sec. 18(a). There also are incentives for schools that increase by 10% the number of students meeting or exceeding the statewide goal level in reading. We respectfully suggest that the performance bonuses be part of a collective bargaining process with teachers and that the school incentives be tied to schools or districts in need of improvement. The financial incentives are within available appropriations and we simply suggest that the need to fund such interventions as the accelerated reading is greater than the need to fund incentives.

We appreciate the funding challenges you face at the legislature and the difficulty inherent in pushing to close the achievement gap without the appropriate funds in place. For a number of years we have worked to increase our interventions – both academic and non-academic, such as physical wellbeing, social and emotional health, student and family engagement – while juggling increased fixed costs, such as salaries, benefits and utilities, all on flat funding. The result is that we have been doing more with less, but we cannot take on these additional interventions without more funding.

The interventions we have in place now – interventions with clear evidence of success in the district's reading scores over time – have been reduced and are under threat of significant additional reductions, given the loss of ARRA funds and flat funding. We have had to cut tutors' hours this year, and they started later in the school year than they should have, so we are concerned about the K-2 consequences. We also have not been able to sustain or expand our interventions in grades 6-12, which have been so helpful to students to our older students who do not yet have the reading skills they need to succeed in high school and after high school.

For curricular improvements, we have been rewriting our curriculum to match the common core, but our ability to purchase such materials as Math in Focus and Plugged-In for grades 3-5 is quite limited without additional funds. We also have had to reduce how much we spend on curriculum development. This fiscal year we have cut our spending for all the contents from \$100,000 to \$55,000. We have been able to keep most of our literacy and math coaches because of Title IIA funding and magnet funding but Title IIA is cut each year. We have fewer library media specialists.

Our principals and assistant principals are typically called on to manage 20 to 25 teachers. According to literature and best practices, the ideal ratio, including in high performing charter schools, should be closer to 1 to 10 or 1 to 12. Our social workers and psychologists are spread between schools, splitting the days of the week when there are students who may need them on any day of the week. Our students have fewer options for summer employment and activity. And these are challenges we must overcome if we are to reach our goals for our students.

We have been doing more with less but as we continue with our School Change Initiative we know that we need more funding in order to achieve more. Frankly, it should be millions more (the loss of stimulus funding alone means we are \$10 million below where we were), and it should be flexible, so that we can refocus our efforts in various schools on an as-needed basis. We are happy to be held accountable for any additional dollars, as we have the data to show how effective the funding and our interventions are.

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We want all our students to achieve to their highest potential. These interventions will help our students; we need your help in helping us help them. Thank you.

### ***Background on New Haven's Efforts***

New Haven is a city and district with consistent investments in our schools. Nearly 85% of New Haven's 20,000 students enjoy new and renovated schools, with outstanding learning spaces and highly efficient physical plants - we have some of the most beautiful school buildings in the country, thanks to our strategic partnership with the State of Connecticut. And inside those buildings, before we started School Reform, New Haven was recognized around the state and the nation for the strength of its curriculum and data systems, the application of the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI), and the implementation of student wellness and school food programs.

Building on these foundations of strong curriculum, state-of-the-art energy efficient buildings, an emphasis on social-emotional learning, and a commitment to the needs of every student from early childhood through high school, three years ago we launched our School Change initiative, with three goals:

- Eliminate the achievement gap with the rest of the state,
- Cut the dropout rate in half, and
- Ensure that every student has the academic ability and the financial resources to be successful in college or some other post high school education.

Looking back, we have accomplished much, both in implementing changed practices and policy in the school system, and more importantly in better results for students. Looking forward, though, we have much further to go – in maintaining the hard work, in continuing to have frank and hard conversations with each other, in continuing to invest on behalf of our students, our teachers, and our principals, and in ensuring that every student in New Haven is afforded the same opportunities in college and life as students everywhere in the state, nation, and world.

A lot has happened in the school district in the last three years, and we are all proud that we are delivering on what we set out to do. Our School Change strategy includes three parts.

- *First, Portfolio:* To recognize that every school is different, and has its own unique path to success, the district has put out school-based budgets, tiered all its schools (into one (1) of three (3) tiers), and begun to encourage schools to vary their approaches to educating students. Over the last two (2) years, the district re-organized and re-staffed five (5) of the lowest performing schools, including partnering with outside providers in two (2) cases – we will do what it takes and work with whoever can help to improve all schools for our students.
- *Second, Talent:* The district built and delivered on a national model Administrator and Teacher Evaluation and Development, resulting in giving the vast majority of teachers stronger coaching and feedback from their managers, and resulting in separation from a small but significant numbers of administrators and teachers who were not delivering for students, despite support. We are working to build talent in our classrooms and schools by managing our staff as collaborative, empowered, and accountable professionals. In fact, Nicholas D. Kristof, a *New York Times* columnist, recently opined about New Haven's model collaboration with our teachers union. The next day, parts of our contract provided the basis for New York City's new agreement with its teachers.
- *Third, Community:* We launched the Promise College scholarship and preparation program, a massive financial, programmatic, and community commitment to our students' long-term

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success. We also launched the Boost program with the United Way, beginning to marshal the strengths of New Haven non-profit community, focusing on wraparound services and supports for students in four (4) domains: physical health and wellness; social, emotional and behavioral health; student engagement and extended learning opportunities; and family support and engagement. We work with Dr. James Comer and utilize positive behavioral support services programs. We are aligning the work of schools with that of community resources and parents, to ensure that each child can come to school each day ready and available to learn.

Much of what we see in various bills this year mirrors the emerging best practices of New Haven, whether in the emphasis on professional development, teacher and principal evaluation, the embrace of school turnaround efforts, the emphasis on Pre-K and wraparound services, all to ensure that students are ready to learn in the classroom. These strategies are yielding concrete evidence of good education results for our students. Parents, teachers, and students have told us the climate is improving in 37 of our 39 schools, including higher academic expectations, more communication, collaboration, and engagement, and greater safety and respect. Last year, we saw strong gains on CMT and CAPT, meeting our first-year goals and taking a solid step in closing the gap with the rest of the state. Last year, the graduation rate went up 1.8%, with many more high school students on track to graduate.

Our fiscal support from the city and the state has remained flat in the last several years, while our costs, investments and commitment to our students have increased. We were able to utilize stimulus funds and one time or short term grant funds to help fill the gap. In New Haven, as elsewhere, the largest portions of our budget and budget increase continue to relate to fixed costs. Aggressive efforts continue to be employed in order reduce these fixed costs, where possible, through negotiations with collective bargaining units, expansion of the comprehensive high efficiency energy program, increased reimbursement through the universal free breakfast and lunch program, and careful evaluation of programs and redistribution of staff and resources.

Given the needs of our schools and students, the sustained gains made by the Board of Education and the necessity for fiscal stability, the time is now for an increase in fiscal support for New Haven's education efforts, to build off of our strong foundation and to continue to press forward to meet our goals. We support the long overdue steps being taken to move closer to fully funding ECS and other funding streams. The additional funds that could accrue to New Haven will cover some – but not all – of the increases we face due to collective bargaining increases and other inflationary costs.

However, the increases in our base funding will not cover the additional costs of our School Change Initiative, whether those involve additional early reading intervention for grades K-3, extended school day and school year programming, extended work with teachers and principals, or expanded wraparound services. We appreciate the recognition for these needs shown by proposed funding; they are a start but cannot meet all the needs of New Haven or other school districts in closing the achievement gap. And the outside grants we have obtained for our School Change Initiative – whether for innovative leadership programs or other services – help, but they too cannot close the funding gap.

We believe we are on the right track. The meaningful collaborations with the New Haven Federation of Teachers, School Administrators Association, custodians and other staff, parents, the business community, nonprofits and other community leaders have created a rich environment for exponential growth not only for our students but also for our educators. New Haven's School Change Initiative has strengthened pride in our schools and drawn the support of the community to ensure our students succeed. Additional support will take us closer to the finish line so that our students will have positive choices for their futures and be productive members of our workforce.