



Patrick Riccards
CEO, ConnCAN

Testimony to Education Committee on H.B. 5350
March 5, 2012

Chairwoman Stillman, Chairman Fleischmann, members of the Education Committee. My name is Patrick Riccards, and I am CEO of the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, or ConnCAN. I am also the former chief of staff and senior counsel to the National Reading Panel, a congressionally established body charged with determining what the research says are the most effective ways to teach our children to read.

I am here today in support of H.B. 5350, an Act Concerning Achieving Universal Literacy by Grade Three. When we discuss our collective desire to close achievement gaps and ensure that every child – regardless of race, family income, or zip code – has the opportunity for both school and life success, there are few factors as important as reading ability. A student's literacy proficiency, particularly in the early grades, is a direct indicator of their potential achievement.

First, let us review where Connecticut stands with regard to effective literacy instruction.

According to the State Department of Education:

- Only one-third of low-income, African-American, and Hispanic/Latino fourth grade students performed at grade level (scored at or above goal) on the 2011 CMT, compared to three fourths of White and non-low income fourth graders.

- Nearly half of all low-income, African-American, and Hispanic/Latino fourth grade students scored Basic or Below Basic on the 2011 Reading CMT. Only 15 percent of White and non-low income fourth graders scored Basic or Below Basic.

It does not look better on national measures. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, when it comes to Connecticut performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Nation's Report Card:

- There are only 10 states where low-income Hispanic/Latino students perform worse in fourth grade reading on the 2011 NAEP than Connecticut.
- Low-income Hispanic/Latino fourth grade students in Maryland perform two grade levels higher in reading than similar Connecticut students on the 2011 NAEP.
- Low-income African-American fourth grade students in Massachusetts perform a full grade level higher in reading than similar students in Connecticut on the 2011 NAEP.

It doesn't have to be this way. We have hard-working teachers who want to see all of their students succeed. We have excellent educators who want to see every child a reader. Now we need to ensure those educators are equipped with the instructional approaches, data, and assessment skills to translate what we know about literacy instruction, from a research perspective, into what is happening in our classrooms, from an instructional perspective.

The research on how best to teach young children to read is clear and incontrovertible. After reviewing more than 100,000 research studies on literacy instruction, the National Reading Panel found that a sound, scientifically based reading instruction program must be based on five key instructional principles:

phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Successful readers must be proficient in all of these areas.

While children may enter the reading continuum at different points, a strong, confident reader requires proficiency in all five components. They build upon each other, providing a strong foundation on which ongoing reading proficiency is based.

This bill recognizes these foundational elements, along with the important roles of strong assessment models and effective educators leading the process. Even more important, it recognizes how critical third grade reading proficiency is to the overall learning process.

States like Arizona and California currently use fourth grade reading scores to determine future prison population planning. Those students currently struggling with literacy skills in third grade will soon begin to struggle in social studies and science and other courses, unable to keep up with materials because they lack reading skills. It should be no surprise that the percentage of struggling third grade readers today is remarkably similar to the number of students who will fail to graduate from high school nine years from now.

By investing in proven reading instruction efforts in our elementary grades, we also avoid the large societal costs that come from literacy struggles. In terms of unemployment, 25 percent of young adults lack the basic literacy skills needed for a job. Sixty percent of adolescents who abuse drugs also have a reading problem. Seventy six percent of children reading in poverty cannot read at a proficient level. And more than 60 percent of young prisoners are functionally illiterate.

H.B. 5350 makes clear that we do not have to accept these statistics as destiny. Despite our past struggles in getting all students proficient in reading, we know

what steps need to be taken. This bill makes clear what is necessary. Necessary to improve the learning process in our schools. Necessary to close the achievement gap. And necessary to transform every child into a strong, effective reader.

In 2006, I served as a contributing author of *Why Kids Can't Read: Challenging the Status Quo in Education*. This book serves a primer of what the research demonstrates is necessary to get virtually every child reading, while demonstrating how teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders can take control of the learning process and ensure that only research-based methods of instruction, teaching that is proven effective, are being used in the classroom.

As we look at our learning gaps and the number of struggling readers Connecticut currently has at the fourth grade level, we should reflect on a passage from *Why Kids Can't Read*:

The good news is that the majority of children who enter kindergarten and elementary school at risk for reading failure can learn to read at average or above average levels, but only if they are identified early and taught using systemic and intensive instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies. If they are not identified early, we will have missed a window of opportunity to help them. We know from research carried out and supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, a part of the National Institutes for Health) that the majority of at-risk readers rarely catch up to their classmates if they are not reading by the time they are 9 years old. Instead these struggling readers face a lifetime of illiteracy. It doesn't have to be this way!

No, it doesn't have to be this way. We can do better by our children and ensure every classroom is using evidence-based instruction and that every child enters the fourth grade a confident reader. H.B. 5350 is a necessary step forward

to ensuring all Connecticut students possess the literacy skills required to succeed in both school and life.

In recent weeks, we have heard a great number of questions raised as to whether this proposal or that recommendation will have an immediate impact on closing the achievement gap. Let me assure you, based on my nearly 15 years of experience in research and policy on reading, that H.B. 5350 can have a direct impact on narrowing our achievement gaps.

Thank you.