

TO: Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly
FROM: Atty. Dennis O'Brien, 120 Bolivia Street, Willimantic, CT 06226
RE: SB #24: Educational Competitiveness
School Choice Options: Hearing on 2/22/12 @ 12 p.m.
DATE: February 21, 2012

I live in the Willimantic section of the Town of Windham. In January of 2011 I retired after twelve years as Judge of Probate for the District of Windham. For the last four of those years, I was the first administrative judge of the Northeast Regional Children's Probate Court, covering all of Windham County plus Mansfield and Coventry.

Previously, for 23 years, I was a staff attorney and then deputy director and director of litigation of Connecticut Legal Services, the statewide legal aid program. For most of my forty years in the practice of law I worked with low income families with children in the urban centers of our state, including Willimantic.

During my long career in legal services we were visited by out of state legal aid lawyers who were appalled by the overconcentration of poor people in our urban centers, especially Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, Waterbury, New London, New Britain and Willimantic. It is no coincidence that these seven towns with similarly very low socioeconomic status constitute ERG I, easily the lowest performing Educational Reference Group in the State of Connecticut.

I have practiced poverty law in all seven of these poor towns, especially Willimantic. Except for two years in the U.S. Army, I have lived in two of the towns, New Britain and Willimantic for most of my nearly 69 years.

I am a graduate of New Britain High School, class of 1961. I grew up in a very large lower income blue collar neighborhood in the north end of New Britain. My parents were not high school graduates. All of my many young friends came from similar families.

None of my many friends had any serious interest in school. None planned to go to college or thought at all about the future. If I took a textbook home from school I was insulted by my friends. Like almost all school children, more than anything, I wanted peer approval, so I did what little homework I did in study periods at school.

From the day I started school, my teachers told me and my parents that I was very bright. Because I readily succumbed to peer pressure and had no real understanding from my family or anyone else of the importance of education, I was a gross underachiever.

It was not until I served in the Army from age 21 to 23 that I began to understand what I had missed by sleepwalking my way through school alongside my many similarly uninformed friends. Having finally seen the light, I entered UConn right after my discharge, and was admitted to the bar of this state less than 7 years later at age 29.

My own early educational misadventures were an experience most Connecticut residents who have grown up in the now vast suburbia of our state cannot appreciate. There are tens of thousands of inner city children here who are having an early childhood experience similar to mine which is robbing them of their futures and seriously impacting the economic fortunes of our entire state by severely limiting our labor force, and incarcerating way too many people at our great expense, not to mention theirs.

My early school life was difficult, but compared to what urban center kids face today, my problem was trivial. I am a white guy never victimized by discrimination. Most poor kids in our cities are African-American or Latino. Like all my young friends, I had two parents in my home, who were mature adults with no language barrier. Many of today's urban kids have single parents who are teenagers. I was not distracted by a thousand television channels, video games, sexist music, cell phones, etc.. We had no TV when I

was a kid and a party line phone I never used. Still I failed, because I had no appreciation of the importance of education. I do now, and that is why I am here.

The educational experiences I had and the work I have done in the low income communities of our state have left me with no doubt at all that the reasons our generally wealthy state has the largest achievement gap in America is the gross overconcentration of the poor in our cities, and our continued and unwise town based school districts.

You simply cannot concentrate hundreds and thousands of poor kids whose families have little understanding of the importance of education in the same schools and expect more than a few of them to succeed. Connecticut does not need 169 plus school districts.

We cannot socio-economically or racially integrate our schools without reducing the number of school districts. The school population of my Town of Windham is overwhelmingly lower income Latino kids and becoming more so all the time. Schools in our surrounding towns are almost lily white and middle class. This school segregation has doomed thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of children statewide to failure in school and in life, and prison and death at an early age in way too many instances.

I commend Governor Malloy and Commissioner Pryor for SB #24 and their very sophisticated yet relatively indirect approaches to address this problem which has been ignored for decades, but it is not enough. The bill should be amended to require the pilot program expansion of the Educational Resource Group I school districts of Hartford, New Britain, Waterbury, New Haven, Bridgeport, New London and Windham to the adjacent suburban ring of each of these urban center towns. It would also be a good idea to have a statewide salary scale for teachers, with a differential for higher cost of living areas like lower Fairfield County. Thank you for your attention to my remarks.

