

Testimony before the Education Committee, February 22, 2012
Craig Baker, Chief Education Officer, Domus

My name is Craig Baker. I am a former social studies teacher and charter school director, and now serve as the Chief Education Officer for the three Domus schools in Stamford and New Haven. I'd like to address a few of the governor's proposed education reforms and tell you why they make financial and educational sense for young people who have historically struggled to find success in a traditional school environment.

Several items in the low-performing school support principle have proven to be effective tools for educating vulnerable youth. We have had the flexibility at our two charter schools and our New Haven district turnaround school, to structure the school day in a way that increases class time and meets the unique needs of our students. Due in part to that flexibility, our students consistently shows significant gains in reading and math proficiency. Strong wraparound services have also contributed to those gains. Our family advocate model employs school-based professionals who actively address non-academic barriers to learning. Family advocates ensure students are able to be in school and ready to learn instead of unable to focus on schoolwork due to hardships such as hunger, homelessness, and violence.

We also support efforts to replicate successful school models and encourage Commissioner Pryor to look at Domus schools, as we're the state's only education provider that I know of who is targeting the lowest-performing students. Every community, particularly cities and neighborhoods facing severe poverty, has a group of struggling students underserved by its educational system. When they attend schools designed to meet their needs, students at high risk of dropping out will increase their chances of graduating, greatly enhancing their ability to make a good living, pay taxes, and be contributing members of our communities.

Finally, we welcome the department's increased focus on individual student gains. Historically, about half our high schoolers enter our school reading four or more grades behind. Last year, those students improved, on average, 3.1 grade levels in reading in just one school year. Yet our students often do not reach Proficiency or Goal on standardized tests since they enter our schools so very far behind. Clearly, their poor historical performance is less an indicator of potential and more one of a broken approach to their education.

Our two Stamford schools are categorized as charter schools. But that tag does not define us. We are similar to our charter school brethren, in that we have a unique and specialized mission. Perhaps what sets us apart is that we actively seek students other schools do not want—children with disruptive behaviors and dismal academic records who've often suffered terrible trauma—in order for them to get the high-quality education to which every child is entitled.

Respectfully submitted,
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