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**Testimony of Dr. Sonia B. Manjon, a Commissioner of the
Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission
Regarding S.B. No. 24 “An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness”
Wednesday, February 22, 2012 at 12:00 PM in Room 1E
at the LOB, Hartford, Connecticut**

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, State Representative Fleischmann and honorable members of the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA), my name is Dr. Sonia B. Manjon, a Commissioner of the Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC). I am here today to speak on behalf of LPRAC in support of S.B. No. 24 “An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness,” limited to the specific areas of the bill discussed by this committee here today such as: (1) finance, including, ECS, funding for charter schools, magnet schools, innovation schools and other choice programs, uniform system of accounting, the minimum budget requirement, conditional funding districts, competitive grants to districts, and small district consolidation incentives, and (2) accountability and low performing schools, including commissioner's network schools, charter school authorization and approval, and other school choice options.

LPRAC, for the record is particularly interested in legislative discussions that enhance families’ access to high-quality early childhood educational opportunities, legislation that aims at closing the achievement gap and improves the low graduation rates for Latino English language learners and other minority students. We, at LPRAC, also support programs that prepare all youth for college success and job skill development for the trades of the 21st century, promote meaningful collaborations between schools and communities (parents, organizations, churches, colleges, and other needed sectors), broaden and strengthen the curriculum for all students, and support dual language education. Furthermore, it is imperative that school administrators and policymakers realize and take seriously the impact of under resourced communities and schools, and institutional racism on the quality of education, specifically but not exclusively, in our Connecticut urban public schools that serve high numbers of Latino, African American, and poor students. As a result we support S.B. No 24, which aims to implement the Governor’s six key principles for education reform which will help the state narrow the achievement gap and restore Connecticut as a model for academic excellence for all students.¹

¹ Key principles for Education Reform as recommended by the Governor of the State of Connecticut: (1)Enhancing families’ access to high-quality early childhood education opportunities (2) Authorizes the intensive interventions and enables the supports necessary to turn around Connecticut’s lowest-performing schools and districts; (3) Expands the availability of high-quality school models, including traditional schools, magnets, charters, and others; (4) Unleashes innovation by removing red tape and other barriers to success, especially in high-performing schools and districts; (5) Ensures that our schools are home to the very best teachers and principals – working within a fair system that values skill and effectiveness over seniority and tenure; & (6) Delivers more resources, targeted to districts with the greatest need – provided that they embrace key reforms that position our students for success.

The Governor's proposal aims at providing \$4.5 million in competitive grants for all districts and a conditional \$39.5 million in aid grants for the lowest-performing school districts with the caveat that those districts embrace key reforms aimed at raising student performance and reducing the achievement gaps amongst their students. These districts, in order to qualify for these funds, will participate in Performance Alliance Group within which they will partner with the state to undertake reforms including: (1) Tiered system of intervention for schools; (2) Focus on getting all kids reading by grade three; (3) Extended learning time; (4) Improvements to teacher and principal assignment and career ladders connected to evaluations; (5) Training for staff on teacher evaluations; & (6) Improved coordination and delivery of wraparound services, including community school models. LPRAC is supportive of all these recommendations offered by the Governor's bill as listed herewith. However, it would respectfully recommend that the Education Committee also add to this bill language that will explicitly state that districts applying for this grant show that they embrace reforms to help English Language Learners (ELL). These students, as I am sure you are already aware, represent a large and growing part of Connecticut's student population and they are often at a greater risk of failing to finish school than their English-speaking classmates. School districts should develop a comprehensive plan regarding the need for critical and high quality programs and policies with efforts to identify and promote current best practices for these programs. LPRAC also encourages the Education Committee to consider increasing the current Education Cost Sharing Grant formula (ECS) for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students at a rate of 20% rather than 15% as recommended by the Governor. Moreover, LPRAC is in agreement with the Governor's recommendation to add students in bilingual education to the ECS formula changes for 2012-13.

The Governor's proposal also introduces measures to attract, expand, replicate, and emulate effective school models that can offer more and better options to our students such as magnet schools, charter schools, CommPACT schools, and Agricultural Science schools. As a matter of fact the bill includes \$14.1 million in additional Charter School funding to increase the state per pupil grant and increase opportunities. This, in our opinion, is important because charter schools are among the most effective in terms of closing the achievement gap for African American and Latino students living in poverty. LPRAC agrees with these recommendations. However, we would just respectfully request that this committee allocates additional funding to aggressively outreach to families of English Language learners so that they are familiar with the choices they have for their children's education. We also recommend new investments that can lead to the creation of new charter schools that will serve the highest-needs student, including English-language learners, low-income students, and special education students.

LPRAC applauds the leadership of the Education Committee and the Governor of Connecticut for making 2012 the year for education reform in Connecticut and we urge the members of this committee to approve Senate bill Number 24 accordingly.

LPRAC, for the record, was created by an act of the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) in 1994 to make recommendations to the members of the Connecticut General Assembly and the Governor for new or enhanced policies that will foster progress in achieving educational success, economic self-sufficiency, end discrimination, improve public safety and achieve health equity in Connecticut.