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SB 24 Testimony

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Good afternoon Chairwoman Stillman, Chairman Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee:

I am Susan Harris, a parent, and former teacher in Connecticut where I taught history for four years. Senate Bill 24: An Act Concerning Education Competitiveness, championed by our Governor, has gained bipartisan support in the legislature and the support of a coalition representing 6 education and business groups in Connecticut. Parents across the state, in urban, suburban, and rural communities have waited a long time for legislation that focuses attention on the classroom and student achievement. I support this bill because it increases accountability in low performing districts, improves readiness assessments for college students, and expands schools of choice and their funding because it is the right thing to do for our students.

As a high school teacher in an urban area I was prepared to meet the academic and achievement needs of my students. I am a graduate of the Alternative Route to Certification (ARC) program and had tutored 2 years prior to teaching. Many of my students came to high school struggling with basic literacy skills along with a void of knowledge in general. I knew that this wasn't a reflection of their aptitude, but rather a reflection of the teaching they had previously been exposed to. I also knew that my task as their current teacher was to work with them where they were. Yet I was frustrated at every turn not because of the kids or their environment but rather the system. It lacked accountability.

At some point I realized that there was a disconnect between wanting to help my students achieve an understanding of history and what the district's goals were: CAPT, BEST, CEUs and teacher evaluations- none of which addressed accountability as it related to student achievement. Obviously the district where I taught was not alone in these priorities. It was a statewide slip-up because here we are addressing the net result of such a slight: the achievement gap, the drop-out rate, the lack of college preparedness.

It's time for all of us to address the mess we're now in. A teacher should never have to apologize to her history students who plan to attend college that practicing for the CAPT will always take precedence over teaching history. No teacher should be told during BEST evaluations that while literacy for low performing students is a nice idea it is not a worthy goal compared to goals of an autocratic nature. Teachers should be able to work together, across grade levels and schools, to make sure that every student is prepared for the work they need to be doing in the next grade before they get there, so that these compromises don't have to be made.

The last time I addressed this body was in the mid-90s. I came to offer testimony against a major education bill that experts said would transform education. It later became law. At the time I said that while I hoped I would be wrong there would be a good chance that an entire generation of students would be lost due to misguided public policy: Policy that focused on everything except student achievement and accountability.

It's time to raise the bar for all students in Connecticut. As I learned from being a parent and a teacher, one size does not fit all in education, and Act 24 helps us begin to have a system that is focused on the needs of individual students. Therefore there must be plenty of options for parents to choose from. Charter schools and other schools of choice are to low performing districts what private schools are to the suburbs. There must be choice, accountability and transparency in the system.

Act 24: An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness reverses the downward spiral of the past 20 years with a bold statement focusing attention on the classroom student achievement and accountability. It deserves the support of the full legislature. Thank you for your attention.