

Good afternoon, Chairman and members of the Committee:

My name is Dr. Eliana Rojas, Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to hear my testimony in support of this reform.

I want to convey my strong support for your effort to improve public education in CT.

As you know we have the widest achievement gap in United States. The 2011 National Assessment for Educational Progress shows that 85% of white fourth graders in Connecticut read at or above a basic level, compared to 48% and 50% of African-American and Hispanic students, respectively. In math, 93% of white fourth graders are at or above a basic level, compared to 59% and 62% of African-American and Hispanic students. Additionally, the gap between low-income and non-low-income fourth graders is three grade levels.

I believe this legislation is a step in the right direction for our schools, but more importantly, it's a step in the right direction for our children. This reform package is quite large so I am going to focus on teacher evaluations and students' progress.

I agree that we should have evaluations that take into account student progress. However, in order to do this well, we must take into account research and best practices of good assessment. The legitimate goal of everyone involved in teaching should be so that "all children can learn"; the best way to verify whether children are learning is by observing and recording step by step students progress. Meaningful and relevant evaluations are critical for the monitoring of the process involved in the improvement of pedagogical practices, which in turn are critical to student learning. Effective multiple evaluations can provide teachers the help they need to improve practice. Here in CT, we have pockets of great work (practices) where school administrators, principals, in service teachers and schools of education like our work diligently on developing processes to have teachers empower themselves with evaluation instruments based on student progress constantly, and professional development is aligned to those evaluations. Though these pockets of successful practice exist and can be models for other programs, we need objective evaluations across the state.

We believe that this is a golden opportunity for students and teachers across CT, one that can be achieved if we work together to create an evaluation system that takes into account student progress, and one that is used as to improve the teaching practices and to reward great teachers (or/and reward effective teaching) rather than to penalize teachers for underperforming students. We all know and need to recognize that not all the professional development teachers receive is relevant to our children's needs.

I urge you to facilitate avenues for ample public discussions to ensure teacher training as well as professional development programs that are more relevant to the needs of the communities our children represent; relevant with respect to cultural and linguistic dynamics and discourses of our community and rigorous with respect to the curriculum and its content. This will ensure that all teachers have high quality options to improve their practice. I am also going to suggest to you to make this law more rigorous in how we measure the teaching and learning cycle of English Language Learners.

Right now we are not addressing the needs of our ELLs. I can assure you, we know what works, and we know how to guide effective teaching and assessment of ELLs. All teacher educators need to work together to expand what works well, and to address and modify what does not.

I am a resident of CT, and have lived in Mansfield, Storrs for the past 24 years. I want to commend you all for making education an important part of your legislative agenda, and to let you know that there are many educators like me at your disposal to make sure that the new policies are based on what is best for our students in CT.

Thank you for your time and your attention. And thank you for being bold enough to support reform that promotes equality.