

STATEMENT of Lisa Thomson,
R.Ed APPLES, Norwalk, CT

Issue: Senate Bill 24 – Developing the Very Best Teachers and Principals

Members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and endorse Governor Malloy's Education Reform Bill, also known as SB 24.

I am an executive member and co-founder of a grassroots organization known as R.Ed APPLES of Norwalk which has 100+ registered members that include parents, PTC/PTA Presidents, educators, taxpayers, concerned citizens, neighborhood activists, politicians and local business owners. We are political but non-partisan, independent, pro education and pro teacher, but most importantly, pro change and reform across the spectrum of educational issues, as outlined in the Governor's Plan.

Although we are located in Gold Coast of Fairfield County, Norwalk is an urban school district, with high levels of poverty, with 44 % of our students on free and reduced lunch, coupled with a significant number of at-risk children that have additional learning needs that require more resources than what might ordinarily be required for wealthier communities in Connecticut. As such, we need to make sure that we get, and retain the most effective teachers and professional administration for our great city.

I wanted to provide you some district specific examples of why the particular component of the Governor's Bill – developing the very best teachers and principals is so important to the City of Norwalk.

- 1) The state talks about the role of leadership in education. Norwalk is on its 6th Superintendent in 15 years. However, the individual heads of our two major unions: the administrator's union (NASA) and teacher's union (NFT) have been in their positions of power and obstruction for over 20 years.
- 2) Our appraisal process for administrators and teachers consists of evaluation booklets with 38 and 57 pages respectively. While teachers have a 4 tiered rating system, there is no rating system for a principal's performance, leaving the position somewhat unchecked.
- 3) Due to budget cuts last year, our Board of Education was forced to get rid of the central office *position* that was responsible for evaluating and developing the elementary school principals and APs. In Norwalk, our 12 elementary schools experience the greatest variation in leadership, curriculum and instruction. We are jokingly referred to as a district of schools not a school district.
- 4) We know that the achievement gap starts in pre-school and extends through 3rd grade. If a child is not reading *on level* by 3rd Grade, they are destined to struggle to achieve, for the remainder of their school years. The state passed the *Foundations in Reading* exam in 2009. Norwalk has approximately 230 K-5 teachers, yet only 19 of them have taken and passed the exam, which is directed at measuring their subject matter teaching expertise in the area of reading. How can this be allowed by the state when in 2011, only 51.9% of our 3rd Grade students read AT GOAL Level? For 5th Graders, getting ready to enter the complexities of middle school, the number of students reading AT GOAL was only 57.4%. We are setting nearly half of our students up for failure.
- 5) Our latest superintendent, who heralds from one of the best run school districts in the country, Montgomery County, Maryland distributed a School Climate Survey to be taken by parents and

teachers. I was fortunate enough to be a member of the Survey Task Force. Approximately 80 % of staff and 20% of parents participated in the survey. However, leadership from both the administration and the teachers unions did everything in their power to squash the survey results from being shared with the community. It took over 3 months to get the individual school data published on the district website because they preferred a watered down, homogenized, district version. It then took another 3 months to deliver specific feedback comments from teachers and parents to the individual school principals. I personally had to threaten FOIA in order to get the feedback presented to the principals. The obstruction of BOTH union leaders was under the guise that they were afraid that principals would single out and punish teachers for their comments on what was an *anonymous* survey.

- 6) Norwalk is also a school district *In Need of Improvement* and while we have made steady progress over the years, with even a couple of our schools making CONNCAN's lists of Success Story Schools, we still face collective bargaining rules and leadership that stand in the way of student achievement. We have a union leader who spends his days writing poisonous rhetoric in a monthly *Vanguard* newsletter to teachers for which the district compensates him \$40,000 a year, despite the fact that he spends no time in the classroom. He then bills his union an hourly rate for attending just about every evening meeting held in the district. From a parent perspective, the system just seems rigged.

These are but a few examples of how our educational system is suffering with regard to the lack of any accountability or staff development measures in place. Norwalk needs to be able to deliver, expand, and retain effective staff or exit ineffective and unprofessional *gatekeepers* from our district. But how can we when existing legislation does not support that kind of environment? I don't believe the stories I have given you are unique to our city. How many more federal grants does the state have to lose, before we reform our educational system to include professionalism, development and adult accountability?

Education is the most important investment we can make as a state. Without educated citizens, our economy is strained and businesses will not invest. The achievement gap in Connecticut between our low income and higher income students is the worst in the country and even our top performing students are purportedly one year behind Massachusetts.

I hope that the members of the Education Committee will rigorously discuss and debate the Governor's Education Bill and put some real teeth into the reforms needed for our great state. I urge you to pass Senate Bill 24 so that we can begin to fix our broken education system and provide all kids in Connecticut the world-class education they deserve.

Thank you,

Lisa Thomson

Co- Founder – R.Ed APPLES of Norwalk