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Testimony before the Education Committee

Tuesday, February 21st, 2012

1:15 pm in Room 1E

Good morning/afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Frank Sykes the Legislative Analyst with the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC) a non-partisan state agency. This Commission advocates on behalf of the African-American community. We accomplish our mission primarily through research, policy analysis, outreach and information sharing. We are here today to comment on *Senate Bill 24 – An act concerning educational competitiveness.*

The Commission commends the efforts of all the stakeholders in striving to identify effective policy solutions in closing the achievement gap. Firstly, looking at the numbers it is unacceptable that minorities experience at least a 50 percent drop out rate annually.¹ The rate of school failure for African-Americans has been consistently higher than the state average since 2002.² The lack of adequate early preparation, lack of afterschool programs, few mentors and role models are

¹ Connecticut State Department of Education – Drop-Out Rates by Race and Ethnicity

² Connecticut SERC – Education Facts

just a list of the many causes for failure. Therefore in principle we are in agreement with the measures in the bill that call for stronger accountability requirements for teachers.

There are mainly three areas that we believe may need more attention. The role of culture as it relates to teacher preparation; and the second is a better system of assigning or matching teachers to students, especially those in schools with the most academically challenged students. Third is the need to align state benchmarks regarding curriculum with federal requirements.

It is estimated that soon there will be no majority racial or ethnic group in the United States—no one group that makes up more than fifty percent of the total population. Already almost one in ten U.S. counties has a population that is more than fifty percent minority. Eight counties reached that status in 2006, bringing the total to 303 of the nation's 3,141 counties.³ Connecticut is no different; therefore teachers need to be even more culturally competent and sensitive to the needs of these students. To maximize professional capacity, educators must be willing and able to reflect on the impact of their culture and racial identity on their practice. Furthermore even within any student demographic certain students exhibit different learning styles that may be deemed unconventional in the school setting. Effective teaching should be flexible and adaptable to deliver the best possible outcomes for this student population as well.

Secondly the Commission believes that we must ensure that qualified teachers are equitably distributed within school districts. The current teacher assignment systems and patterns shortchange low-income students and students of color. We have an obligation to work in ensuring that all students regardless of race, poverty or geography have access to qualified teachers. Therefore it is critical that students facing the most difficult academic challenges be staffed with the best teachers capable of producing the highest educational outcomes. We are

³ The Center for Public Education – The changing demographics of the United States and their schools

encouraged by the inclusion of a component of the bill that incentivizes high-performing individuals to teach in high needs districts and seeks to improve the recruiting of top tier teachers and leaders. We are hopeful that these measures along with other education reform initiatives will help all students achieve.

Finally failing elementary and middle schools that are required to meet accountability benchmarks in mathematics and reading, must include science. In addition each academy that has mathematics and literacy blocks must include a block for science. This measure would align and be consistent with the language proposed in the Connecticut State Department of Education Title I NCLB Waiver Application language on accountability and performance. Successful STEM education is needed in failing schools for students to achieve success in post secondary and meaningful employment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.