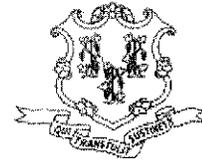




State of Connecticut  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



**Commission on Children**

**Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman  
Executive Director  
Connecticut Commission on Children**

**Appropriations Committee  
Connecticut General Assembly  
February 21, 2013**

**Senator Harp, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations  
Committee,**

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children.

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Commission regarding the Governor's proposed FY13-14 biennial budget for the State Department of Education.

I will focus my testimony on critical functions that either housed at SDE or consolidated into the proposed Office of Early Childhood.

**K-3 Reading Assessment**

Much has been said about Connecticut's achievement gap, and the fact that Connecticut has the largest reading gap in the nation. In CT only 26% of African-American or Hispanic students are reading at goal by the end of 3rd grade.

This is a systemic failure which we must address by confronting issues of race and poverty in this State, particularly institutionalized low expectations for Black and Hispanic students. With the right interventions, 95% of students can learn to read.

Last year, the General Assembly's Black and Puerto Rican Caucus led in writing state-wide reforms in early literacy, which were included in Governor Malloy's Educational Reform Act (P.A. 12-116), signed in May. Additionally, five schools selected last year from across the state received intensive reading instruction and intervention.

Through funds included in the FY13 budget, those schools received an intensive reading instruction program, which includes a research-based intervention strategy for students reading below proficiency. The schools also receive funds for an external literacy coach who “teaches the teachers” on the science of reading instruction; 4 reading interventionists, who support students individually; rigorous assessments to track improvement, teacher and principal training in proven reading instruction, and summer school for students who need it.

The Dept. of Education has partnered with the Center for Behavioral Educational Research (CBER) at UCONN to implement critical interventions at these schools and across the state. Each student who does not read at proficiency will get an individualized plan.

Statewide reforms include a coordinated state-wide reading plan, to bring consistency and quality to the way reading is taught across the state; reading instruction based on science; reducing the disproportionate and inappropriate ID of minority students as Special Ed.; professional development in reading for teachers and administrators, especially our reading teachers because until now reading teachers were not required to learn how to teach reading; and incentives for schools that improve their reading performance trend.

Initial reports on the pilot’s success have been extraordinary. The Grossman fund has found the outcomes so successful they are funding the city of Norwalk to extend the model. We have 7 out of 11 elementary schools in Norwalk using the reading assessment currently. It's been so positive that the 4th and 5th grade teachers are asking to use this new reading assessment instrument. All four new principals asked to be part of the grant and the others are eagerly waiting to use it next year or the year after.

Naugatuck, as an entire district, is using their Alliance grant money to continue this initial work in all of their elementary schools. East Haven is also using the model throughout their district. They've been so pleased with it that they are also using the math assessments.

All 1224 K-3 students in the five districts using the model have been screened and 45% of all students need and receive small group intervention. Each school has had a supplemental intervention plan developed.

According to CBER, student data collected after only 2 months of intervention (Nov-Jan) indicate:

- Significant growth for students receiving intervention across all grade levels and measures, and
- Emerging trends indicating that students receiving intervention are making greater gains than expected (e.g., intervention has enabled students in kindergarten to make statistically significantly more growth in phonemic awareness after 2 months).

The Casey Foundation, carefully following the literacy work in each state, has presented the Commission on Children the National Pacesetter Award in Reading resulting from this particular work. The Education Commission on the States wrote up this work as one of the best state innovations. The Governor is speaking on this work at the Press Club in Washington DC in the next few weeks.

Despite these accolades based on the early indicators of success, the Governor's proposed budget includes "9-11% cuts" to the K-3 Reading Assessment Program. Additionally, the funding stream for the Reading Assessment Program is proposed to be consolidated "[i]n order to reduce the number of accounts and provide the agency with more flexibility in executing programs."

The Commissioner on Education's budget request for FY15-15 included a request for level funding for the 5 schools at \$2.7M. The Governor's proposal \$0 out that line item and groups these funds with several other programs into the "School Improvement Line item" at \$59,440,949 for FY14 and \$68,397,453 for FY15 without further specificity on how these funds will be allocated between programs. This is not a transparent and secure investment in this proven program.

The K-3 Reading Assessment line item should be maintained as a separate line item, but called a K-3 Reading Assessment Program, so that we can make it permanent and track the funding for the program as it grows. Where every dollar has reaped a substantial return on the State's investment in closing the achievement gap, these dollars must be disaggregated, preserved and increased.

The Commission recommends further that the funding for the program be fully maintained for the five schools as proposed by the Commissioner of Education, and should be increased to include up to five more schools as the law allows.<sup>1</sup> With

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<sup>1</sup> According to Sec. 89(b) of P.A. 12-116, "for the school year commencing July 1, 2013, and each school year thereafter, the commissioner may select up to five such schools to participate in the intensive reading instruction program."

the proposed investment in the exciting early childhood system, you cannot have children coming in through preschool, and then failing due to our schools not being up to speed to intervene with necessary reading interventions. The irony would be palpable.

### **Other Early Childhood Funding**

We commend the Governor for recognizing the important role that parents play as their child's first and most important teacher in recommending that the Community Plans for Early Education, Improving Early Literacy and Parent Trust Fund be moved in the new Office of Early Childhood.

Each of these initiatives is, in its own way, complimentary and supported through a unique private- public partnership with the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund. The Memorial fund provides matching funds to enhance the state investment in working with parent and the community to create better early child outcomes. The Governor was wise to take advantage of this source of matching funds to maintain the state commitment.

The Parent Trust Fund which was created by the Legislature in 2001 to fund programs aimed at improving the health, safety and education of children by training parents in civic leadership skills and supporting increased, sustained, quality parental engagement in community affairs. We fully support the oversight of the Parent Trust being transferred from SDE to the OEC with one small caveat. We must ensure that we honor the original intent of the legislation and reach a broad range of parents, not solely those who have young children. We fully concur that parent engagement and leadership can be sparked in the early years, but we must also be prepared to nurture and sustain with intention plans and activities through grade 12 and beyond.

### **Funding Maintained**

The Commission fully supported the Legislature in developing the vision in PA 11-181 which set the framework for the new Office of Early Childhood. We commend the Governor for recommending that funding be maintained for core programs, like School Readiness Programs, quality enhancement, Head Start, and Family Resource Centers because they are consistent with that vision:

### **Elimination**

We are deeply concerned about the proposed elimination of Even Start and After School funding. Even Start programs provide intensive family literacy services involving both parent and children. The state-funded After School Program serves

about 5,000 children K-12 in 61 sites across 27 cities and employs 500 people. Rigorous studies show that after school programs can reduce juvenile crime and violence, decrease drug use and addiction, reduce teen pregnancies, and boost school success and high school graduation. After school is a documented prevention strategy that deserves continued funding and is well worth the investment. We encourage the continuation of funding for both programs.

The "Parent University" initiative is part of the school reform effort created to address the achievement gap. Parent Universities offer parents a way to learn to partner with school staff in creating better academic outcomes for children. Based on a successful initiative in Boston, Connecticut's Parent Universities have shown promise in promoting parental involvement in schools and has given schools a proven strategy to work alongside parents. This initiative deserves continuation funding.

A number of smaller programs received significant cuts or were eliminated. Head Start Early Childhood Link, which provides quality enhancement for Head Start and funding for the Bridgeport ABCD program, saw a \$0.22 million cut (11%). Wraparound services, School Based Health Centers, the K-3 Reading Assessment Pilot saw 9-11% cuts. Additionally, the proposed budget recommends canceling the planned School Based Health Center expansion. Funding for many elements of the Children's Trust Fund (including Family Empowerment, Family School Connection, the Children's Law Center and the Kinship Fund) was eliminated, as was funding for Even Start and Parent Universities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.