

**Testimony Regarding Community Schools
Raised S.B. 1002: An Act Concerning Community Schools**

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Education Committee

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Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee

I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children supports the concept of community schools. By pairing high-quality educational experiences with services that reduce some of the challenges to learning that low-income children may encounter, such schools can better support children's learning while addressing underlying inequities in family well-being. Although CT Voices supports the proposal to add to the number of community schools and to evaluate them using multiple criteria (rather than only test scores), we have several concerns about Senate Bill 1002's proposed method of funding the programs, the districts' capacity to implement the programs, and the requirement that districts select schools for participation.

The community school project is a very promising concept that several Connecticut districts have already begun developing. Raised Senate Bill 1002 proposes that the thirty highest-need districts in Connecticut, "will establish full service community schools to begin operations in the school commencing July 1, 2014"ⁱ in the thirty highest need districts in the state. These schools would provide comprehensive educational, developmental, family, health and wrap-around services during non-school hours.ⁱⁱ Their goal is to improve academic development, build school and community engagement and improve the skills, capacity and well-being of the community in which the school is located.ⁱⁱⁱ

This model is based on research that overwhelmingly establishes that out-of-school factors (such as family income, health, and neighborhood safety) strongly influence children's achievement (as measured by standardized tests). For example, there is a statistically significant and large negative correlation between the percent of children eligible for free and reduced price meals and standardized test results in school districts in Connecticut – as poverty rises, scores decline.^{iv} This research suggests that the out-of-school supports offered by community schools, in addition to a quality educational program, could help reduce the out-of-school challenges to children's academic success and well-being.

In 2003, a review of twenty community school evaluations suggested various positive academic and developmental outcomes, depending on the program.^v However, the review also suggested the need for sound methods and sufficient data to evaluate the quality and impact of community school programs.

For example, Hartford, Connecticut has seven community school programs.^{vi} The final report on these programs yielded mixed results and it called for an improved process of collecting evidence.^{vii}

The community schools plan would promote the use of multiple criteria to evaluate children’s development and well-being in school.^{viii} The proposal would require a school and community operations audit to document the academic and socioeconomic needs of the families and children that attend the selected school.^{ix} Based on these audits, a full-service community plan would address the holistic academic, socioeconomic, and physical needs of children in the community.^x

It is important to evaluate the community schools project using multiple criteria because single-measure academic indicators such as “proficiency” rates on the CMT or CAPT could provide a distorted picture of success or failure.^{xi} By 2015, the bill would require a robust program evaluation of the full service community schools, including data on the effectiveness of the partnerships, a broad array of indicators of children’s academic development and well-being, and financial information.^{xiii} The information above could prove useful in rigorous studies of the impact of community schools compared to other school models with similar demographic groups.

However, because SB 1002 does not guarantee sufficient resources for the new community schools, it risks becoming an unfunded mandate for the state’s 30 poorest cities and towns. The bill proposes that the Department of Education, “within available appropriations” shall provide an annual grant to the local or regional board of education for the school districts,^{xiii} yet requires that these thirty high-need districts select three schools for participation regardless of whether the state provides any grant funding, and indeed regardless of whether they are capable of funding the project on their own.

Additionally, implementation could be hampered by a lack of district capacity. Some districts, such as Hartford, for instance, may have greater staff capacity and experience working with community schools to implement this project than other districts. In light of the tremendous policy demands that the thirty high-need, or “alliance”, districts currently face, districts should elect to participate in the community schools project.^{xiv}

As an alternative, we propose that the bill be amended to eliminate the proposed mandate and instead provide the 30 high-need districts with the *option* to select schools to participate in the community schools project and that the State Department of Education be directed to provide support through planning grants and technical assistance to districts that opt-in. However, the other aspects of the model would remain unchanged for districts that choose to participate. For districts that have the capacity and interest to participate, the community schools may be able to provide children and families with significant support towards academic growth and improved well-being. To achieve this end, the community schools bill should be amended to read:

Sec. 2. (NEW) (Effective July 1, 2013) On or before August 1, 2013, the local or regional board of education for each school district designated as an alliance district, pursuant to section 10-262u of the general statutes, ~~may shall~~ identify two elementary schools and one high school located in the school district that will establish full service community schools at such schools to begin operations in the school year commencing July 1, 2014. The board of education shall give priority to those elementary schools with existing family resource centers.

Thank you for your time and considering our testimony. Please contact me should you have any concerns or questions.

ⁱ Raised Senate Bill No. 1002, “An Act Concerning Community Schools.” LCO No. 3747, January Session 2013. <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2013/TOB/S/2013SB-01002-R00-SB.htm>. Section 2.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* See Section 1. See Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder. *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right*. Economic Policy Institute; Washington, D.C. Teachers College Press; New York, NY: 2008. In Chapter 8, Rothstein recommends improving the quality and resources available for after school hours as part of an improvement strategies for children’s academic growth and well-being.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* See Section 1

^{iv} See Cotto, Jr., Robert. “Breaking Down the District Performance Index.” Connecticut Voices for Children. Jul. 2012. Presentation. A correlation for the 2010-2011 district performance index data revealed that the percent of students that are eligible for free or reduced price meals in a district and the district performance index were significantly related, $r = -0.942$, $n = 181$, $p < .000$, one tail.

^v See *Making the Difference: Research and Practice In Community Schools*. Coalition for Community Schools. Washington, D.C. 2003. Web. <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/Page/CCSFullReport.pdf>. In this review of twenty initiatives, the impact on young people attending community schools varied from program to program. The impacts ranged, but included: improved grades in schools courses and/or scores in proficiency testing, improved attendance, reduced behavioral or discipline problems and/or suspensions/expulsions, increased access to physical and mental health services and preventative care, greater contact with supportive adult, improvement in personal or family situation, abuse, or neglect, increased promotions or on-time graduations, increased sense of personal control over academic success, decrease in self-destructive behaviors, including irresponsible sexual activity and drug use, reduced dropout rate, increased sense of attachment and responsibility to the community, increased sense of school connectedness, strengthened social and public-speaking skills, increased capacity for self-direction, positive effects on educational aspirations and credit accumulation. 11 of the 20 initiatives measured the impact on families, these benefits include: improved communication with schools and teachers, improved stability and/or other outcomes related to basic housing, food, transportation, and employment needs, increased ability to work more hours, miss work less or to move from part-time to full-time work, increased confidence for parents in their role as their child’s teacher, greater attendance at school meetings, increased knowledge of child development, strong sense of responsibility for children’s schooling, decreased family violence, increased civic participation, improvement in adult literacy. Fourteen of the twenty evaluations studied the impact on the “whole-school” environment, these varied, but include: principal and staff affirmation of on-site services as an important resources, increased parent participation in children’s learning, growth in nonpartisan support for public education and increased resources through increased community partnerships, teacher recognition of parent participation as an asset, increased classroom emphasis on creative, project-based learning connected to the community and innovations in teaching and curriculum, school environments are more cheerful and orderly, there is increased perception of safety, services well-integrated into the daily operation of schools, teachers spend more time on class preparing and working with students, improvement in teacher attendance. The impact on communities varied by programs, but include: increased community knowledge and improve perception of initiative, increased community use of school building, more family awareness of community access to facilities previously unknown or unaffordable, improved security and safety in surrounding area, strengthened community pride and identity, engagement of citizens and students in school and community service.

^{vi} See Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. “Hartford Community Schools.” Web. 2013.

<http://www.hfpg.org/HowWeHelp/TargetedGrantmaking/HartfordCommunitySchools.aspx>

^{vii} See “Hartford Community Schools: Final Evaluation Summary.” OMG Center for Collaborative Learning. 2012 Sept. Report presented to the Hartford Board of Education in December 2012. The report indicates qualitative evidence of greater participation of children in the programming and services, as well as anecdotal evidence regarding improved culture, climate, and perception of school environment. However, the report also notes that quantitative and broader evidence and methods that are more rigorous are still lacking. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the impact of the services and programs for children and families with the current information.

^{viii} See Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder. *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right*. Economic Policy Institute; Washington, D.C. Teachers College Press; New York, NY: 2008. In Chapter 8, Rothstein recommends using a broader array of indicators and evidence to evaluate schools.

^{ix} Raised Senate Bill No. 1002, “An Act Concerning Community Schools.” LCO No. 3747, January Session 2013. <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2013/TOB/S/2013SB-01002-R00-SB.htm>. Section 4.

^x *Ibid.* See Section 4 and 5.

^{xi} See Cotto, Jr, Robert. “Addition through Subtraction: Are Rising Test Scores in Connecticut School Districts Related to the Exclusion of Students with Disabilities?” Connecticut Voices for Children. New Haven, CT. 2012 Jan. Web.

^{xii} *Ibid.* See Section 8

^{xiii} *Ibid.* See Section 7.

^{xiv} See Elmore, Richard. *School Reform From the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance*. Harvard Education Press; Cambridge, MA. 2004. Elmore discusses the capacity of districts to respond to new accountability measures and policies and the problems for districts and schools that lack capacity to implement legislated reforms. In Connecticut, other new initiatives include a state-mandated teacher evaluation system, potential implementation of curriculum and testing associated with “common core”, conditional funding requirements, and new incentives associated with the state’s interim test-based accountability system.