



Testimony by Jeffrey Villar, Ph.D. to the Education Committee

March 12, 2014

Good afternoon, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Education Committee. As the Executive Director of the Connecticut Council for Education Reform (CCER), I would like to share CCER's positions about the bills on this agenda. I will direct my comments to these two bills:

1. H.B. No. 5078, "An Act Imposing a Moratorium on the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards;" and
2. H.B. No. 5331, "An Act Concerning the Implementation of the Revisions to the PEAC Guidelines,"

CCER strongly opposes H.B. No. 5078, "An Act Imposing a Moratorium on the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards" because it is both irresponsible and inefficient to re-new investigations about the legitimacy of the Common Core after schools and districts across the state have already begun implementation. The Common Core State Standards gained traction in the face of increasing evidence that our public education system is not accomplishing its intended goals. In Connecticut, one third of our low-income students don't graduate from high school, and those students who do graduate are often under-prepared for colleges and/or careers. As the number of our college students who need remedial courses during their freshman year rises, our performance on international tests falls.

For these reasons, Connecticut began investigating the efficacy of Common Core as a potential solution in 2010. The ultimate adoption of Common Core in Connecticut was informed by: a comparison study of the Common Core standards and Connecticut's then-existing standards, which was performed by fifty expert educators;ⁱ a June 2010 stakeholder conference eliciting input on the quality of the standards, which was attended by more than 100 individuals, most of whom represented school districts;ⁱⁱ a post-conference survey, which showed that all respondents agreed the Common Core standards would help prepare students for success in college;ⁱⁱⁱ and by a report evaluating the state's adoption process, which was conducted by the Director of the Center for Collaborative Evaluation and Strategic Change at Education Connection, and which found that the adoption process had been "inclusive, collaborative, and data-based."^{iv}

The Common Core was actually supported by both the CEA^v and the AFT^{vi} as a measure that would improve outcomes for students. In fact, the majority of teachers

polled this year still support the Common Core State Standards.^{vii} Connecticut's educators and stakeholders all recognized that, for the sake of our students, we needed to raise our standards in school, and we needed to initiate that process immediately. To that end, districts across Connecticut began the process of adopting curricula that are aligned with the Common Core years ago. I know this firsthand, as the former superintendent of one such district.

Recently, there has been a public outcry against Common Core, based not upon the validity of the standards themselves, but upon the process of implementation. Although implementation has been difficult in Connecticut, this is not a problem that can or will be solved legislatively. In fact, the American Federation of Teachers sent out an e-mail to its membership on March 10th, confirming that legislative delays are not the solution; I expect they will be testifying today to support these sentiments. Instead of crippling districts that have already begun implementation, we should be supporting them in that process. We have given our districts control over the process of writing curriculums,^{viii} and we now need to allow them to see that process through. It is a process that will be challenging and time-consuming, but it will be worth it.

I know personally how difficult that task is for our districts' leaders. I have been a superintendent in two Connecticut districts, and the associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction in a third district. The Common Core represents the most significant shift in learning priorities that I have experienced in my nineteen years working in Connecticut's public schools. This is because it requires all elementary teachers to master content in a new way. That is extremely difficult work. It is work that will be most successful when district administrations collaborate deeply with teachers to develop curriculums. If districts are able to build that type of collaborative culture, teachers will thrive, in spite of the challenge of change. Successful districts will give core groups of teachers representing diverse experiences at least fifteen days to meet and develop grade-level curriculums and associated assessments.

We can support districts in these efforts by permitting them to make Common Core implementation one of their main focuses for multiple years. We must help them to resist the temptation to demand quick fixes, or to shift priorities from year-to-year. Proper implementation requires teachers to develop a new level of mastery and teamwork. This will certainly take time to perfect.

However, I urge you to continue supporting our districts by opposing H.B. 5078, which is designed to disrupt these important efforts.

CCER is also concerned that Section 4 of H.B. No. 5331, "An Act Concerning the Implementation of the Revisions to the PEAC Guidelines" could impede the forward progress needed to successfully implement the new teacher evaluation system. As part of the revisions referenced in the proposed bill, in January, Governor Malloy asked the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC) to solicit teacher and administrator feedback about the teacher evaluation system and to share it with him and other stakeholders by January 1, 2015.^{ix}

Section 4 of the bill would freeze this year's funding for professional development and technical training associated with the teacher evaluation program until the school districts comply with the January 1, 2015, feedback deadline.

In order to be successful, the new teacher evaluation program needs more professional development and technical training. Researchers from the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education recommended these in a January, 2014 evaluation of the pilot program's implementation.^x Professional development and technical training could be paid for with the funding which the bill's proposed language would freeze. If this funding could pay for opportunities that would make the teacher evaluation program better, it should not be frozen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Connecticut State Department of Education (2012). ESEA Flexibility Request, page 14. Retrieved March 11, 2014 from http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/nclb/waiver/esea_flexibility_request_052412.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Connecticut State Department of Education (2012) at page 23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Mhora Newsom-Stewart (June 2010). Common Core State Standards State Adoption Process Evaluation Report, page 8 (Education Connection).

^{iv} Dr. Mhora Newsom-Stewart (June 2010) at page 14.

^v Connecticut Education Association Frequency Questionnaire (2014). Retrieved March 10, 2014 from <http://blogcea.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/nea-cc-cea-fq-public-2-26-14.pdf>

^{vi} American Federation of Teachers website on Common Core State Standards. Retrieved March 10, 2014 at <http://www.aft.org/issues/standards/nationalstandards/>

^{vii} Scholastic and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2014). Primary Sources: America's Teachers on Teaching in an Era of Change (Third Edition). Retrieved on Mar. 4, 2014 from <http://www.scholastic.com/primarysources/PrimarySources3rdEdition.pdf>.

^{viii} Connecticut is a "local control" state, which grants to local and regional boards of education the authority to set curriculum standards and the instructional programs in their schools. The newly adopted national standards will provide direction to local curriculum committees as they develop grade-by-grade and course level curriculum. EdWeek (2010). "State Board of Education Adopts New Academic Standards for Connecticut Schools." Retrieved on Feb. 28, 2014 from http://www.edweek.org/media/board_adopts_standards.pdf

^{ix} Governor Malloy letter to PEAC, January 28, 2014, retrieved from: http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/cert/peac/peac_letter_012814.pdf

^x Donaldson, Morgaen, et al., "An Evaluation of the Pilot Implementation of Connecticut's System for Educator Evaluation and Development," UConn Center for Education Policy Analysis, Neag School of Education, January, 2012.