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**Testimony of Commissioner Roberto Fernandez in support of
Raised Bill No. 476 “An Act Concerning the Academic Achievement Gap.”
Education Committee, Monday, March 17, 2014
11:00 a.m. in Room 2B of the LOB in Hartford.**

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and distinguished members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I speak in support of SB 476, An Act Concerning the Academic Achievement Gap. My name is Roberto Fernandez; a Commissioner and Chairman of the Priorities and Legislation Committee of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC).

The purpose of the legislation before you today is to require all alliance districts to provide full-day kindergarten and to increase the amount of time a student may spend in bilingual education from thirty months to sixty months. LPRAC is supportive of both of these recommendations but it will primarily discuss the issue of bilingual education in this testimony.

Connecticut’s Latino population, as many people in this room knows, is the state’s second fastest-growing, with a nearly 50 percent increase during the past decade. The state’s 510,645 Latinos now represent 14.2 percent of the population and Latino students as a percent of all K-12 students already reached 18.6% of the overall student population. It is also important to note that the child poverty rate for this population is hovering at 31 percent with unfortunately the largest achievement gap in the nation for low-income students of Hispanic descent. Moreover, in Connecticut there are more than 30,000 English Language Learners (ELL) that speak over 139 different languages –Spanish speaking students however, accounted for 72 percent of all ELLs based on information released by the State Department of Education (SDE) – an ELL student population, which based on the most recent data available, is increasing and is at a greater risk of dropping-out.

It is within this context that LPRAC voted in favor of hosting a fact finding hearing on January of this year to help us listen to all stakeholders (parents, children, academics, teachers, administrators, policy-makers and the general public) about a broad range of bilingual education issues within current tendencies in our state that apparently allow schools to erroneously offer alternatives to bilingual education. At this hearing, which lasted over five hours long, LPRAC heard significant allegations that bilingual education in several parts of our state was either eliminated, weakened or fully discontinued. Several speakers asked LPRAC to recommend to the legislature to repeal the Special Master legislation, which according to their testimony has not yielded improvements in the conditions or opportunities for Latino

children. We also heard that current state funding was insufficient for a district to implement and maintain a high quality bilingual program and many other experts encouraged the state to study best practices for ELL students, including the creation of dual language programs. LPRAC was shocked to learn that it may take one full year for a newly identified school district to provide bilingual education to children in need of this service. However, the overwhelming majority of our speakers recommended expanding the state requirement to provide bilingual instruction from thirty months, to sixty months as recommended by SB 476.

It is our understanding based on testimony received by the SDE at our agency's hearing that they are "supporters" of the extended time but they shall not support a 60 month program until the state addresses the bilingual teacher shortage currently affecting our state and most importantly until the state properly fund the current underfunded 30 month-long program – we at LPRAC partially agree with the SDE but due to the significant demographic shift taking place in our state and harsh reality facing ELL students as explained earlier in this testimony we strongly believe the need for lawmaker to address all these issues (i.e., teacher shortage & funding issues) now to ensure equal access and equitable educational opportunities for all ELL students.

Currently there are 36 districts with 244 schools that must provide bilingual education in 2014. The state currently funds bilingual education, through the Bilingual Education grant. The appropriation for the state grant is \$1,916,130, which has remained the same since 2010-11. The SDE does not collect data on how much local districts spend on bilingual education, so we are unable to determine how much it would cost to fully fund all 30 or 60-month bilingual education programs, state-wide. However, if the funds which are returned to the state from district/schools that indicate their parents do not want bilingual education and thus do not apply for the grant could be awarded to districts/schools with a higher proportion of students and parents that want access to bilingual education programs. This approach could be used as seed money to enhance numerous program models including the model recommended by SB 476.

Moreover, the SDE should be commended for developing strategies that aim at diminishing bilingual teacher shortages in our state. As a matter of fact, it is our understanding that their recommendations on this field shall be ready for deployment in 2016 and current legislation such as Raised SB No. 18 "An Act Concerning the English Language Learner Educator Incentive Program", if adopted, have the potential to encourage a new generation of teachers to be interested in a career that promotes quality educational opportunities and equity for this long underserved group.



LPRAC is also supportive of the creation of the bureau of English Language Learners within the SDE and supports legislation that increases dual language programs in Connecticut. (1) To create a Bureau of English Language Learners within the SDE, we estimate that the cost would be approximately \$210,000 (for 3 positions) plus fringe benefits and some minimal expense for supplies and equipment. (2) It is estimated that each dual language program would require at least two full-time certified teachers, at an average salary of approximately \$75,000 each, totaling \$150,000 plus minimal expenses for supplies and equipment. LPRAC highly recommends adding these two recommendations to the current bill – by doing so you will be addressing the unique needs of English language learners by providing a comprehensive approach to a complex topic that includes accountability, teacher training, appropriate assessments, funding and other on-going issues that – when well designed and well implemented – is an effective approach for teaching second language learners.

LPRAC for the record is mandated to review and comment on any proposed state legislation or recommendations that may affect the Latino and Puerto Rican population of the state. (LPRAC) was created by an act of the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) in 1994. This 21 member non-partisan commission is mandated to make recommendations to the CGA and the Governor for new or enhanced policies that will foster progress in achieving health, safety, educational success, economic self-sufficiency, and end discrimination in Connecticut.

We urge you to pass SB 476.