

Testimony of Hartford Superintendent

Dr. Christina M. Kishimoto

Education Committee
Connecticut General Assembly

Monday, March 17, 2013

Co-Chairs Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, Vice-Chairs Senator Bye and Representative McCrory, Ranking Members Senator Boucher and Rep. Ackert, and distinguished members of the Education Committee.

My name is Dr. Christina M. Kishimoto, Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools.

Hartford Public Schools wishes to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to testify in support of S.B. 476, An Act Concerning the Academic Achievement Gap, an important measure that affects a large portion of our student population and, by extension, the district's and Connecticut's success rates.

Although, as an alliance district, Hartford Public Schools long ago recognized the importance of providing full-day kindergarten at all of its elementary schools, we recognize that other alliance districts, serving populations similar to our own, might not be so offering this service to a similar degree. Kindergarten is not longer the source of light enrichment that it once was. It is a place where, in many cases, students encounter their first experience with serious instruction in literacy and mathematics, not unlike what first grade was more than a generation ago.

It is a cornerstone in the national effort to have all students reading at grade level by third grade. Connecticut would do well to amend state statutes require full-day kindergarten in all of the alliance districts and provide the funding necessary to make it happen. Fully funded full-day kindergarten would take the state one large step closer to closing its worst-in-the-nation achievement gap.

The part of S.B. 476 that would most directly benefit Hartford Public Schools is the provision that increases the amount of time that an English Language Learning student spends in a bilingual education program from thirty months to sixty months. As many of you know, our district has been advocating for this change for many legislative sessions.

Hartford Public Schools has the largest concentration of English Language Learners in the state by far -- 17.7% of the total the student population, or 3,700 students. The state average is 5 percent. Thirty-five schools are above the state average and 20 schools are above even our own district average. As a result, we have had to develop a strong body of research on the delivery of adequate services.

Our experience, over several decades, is that it takes about three to five years for ELL students to reach proficiency in English depending on the grade level and strength in their native language. Extending the time that a student spends in a bilingual education program helps create a fairer standard for assessing student growth and, by extension, would help close the Achievement gap.

In addition to extending the amount of time that a student spends in a bilingual program, we also recommend lengthening Connecticut's current 10-month ELL exemption from taking state reading/language arts assessments to 30 months.

We also ask that the state provide an opportunity for ELL students to take standardized tests in their native language, as it would be much better indicator of skills and knowledge. Currently, California, Texas, New York and Florida provide native language accommodations. Connecticut – the Education state – should do no less.

Finally, we ask that the state create pre-service teacher-training programs that require more course work for teaching ELL students. Universities are currently not training teachers adequately to meet the ELL demands of urban systems.

Hartford's significant history with the ELL student population and can attest to the positive impact these recommendations would have. Through our reform efforts to date, we have delivered on four consecutive years of performance gains.

In order to sustain and accelerate these gains we need to be in the best possible position to deliver high quality services to every student in the Hartford Public Schools district. We welcome the opportunity to play an active role in the dialogue around the future of ELL students in our state.