

Testimony 3/3/15

To: Members of The Appropriations Committee

From: Tracey Madden-Hennessey, Associate Director, YWCA New Britain

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Tracey Madden-Hennessey and I am the Associate Director of the YWCA New Britain. I am also the Vice Chair of New Britain's Coalition for Youth and a Board Member for The Connecticut After School Network.

Although I recognize how difficult decisions will be regarding the budget this year, I am testifying to support restoration of funding for several programs and initiatives that have had a dramatic and positive impact on New Britain's children.

As you are aware, New Britain struggles with many of the same social and economic issues as Connecticut's largest cities. More than 80% of its student population is eligible for free and reduced lunch indicating a high percentage of children living in poverty. Test scores for city youth have historically been at the bottom or near the bottom of scores when compared with other municipalities. The city serves a large percentage of youth with special needs and large numbers of children whose first language is not English requiring different and additional accommodation and intervention.

However, most recently there have been many bright spots in New Britain that indicate progress is being made to change these conditions with funding from some of the very initiatives that the Governor's budget has recommended to cut or reduce. Several efforts are being recognized both in Connecticut and nationally for the promising outcomes they are producing.

First, I am requesting that you restore funding for Community Plans for Early Childhood and the Early Literacy Grant. Although small in nature, this funding supports the work of Community Coalitions using data to create solutions to improve outcomes for children and strategies related directly to literacy development. The Coalition for New Britain's Youth and its work is our local example. This funding is critical as it leverages other private funds that support highly successful projects. Dollars in New Britain have supported:

- Advocacy for **increased access to preschool**, vital in a district where only a third of children are reading on grade level by third grade. New Britain five year olds entering kindergarten with an early childhood experience has increased from 38% in 2003 to 78% in 2014.
- A collaborative effort to reduce the rate of **chronic absenteeism** at the elementary schools. Chronic absenteeism dropped from 19.5% in 2012 to 13.0% in 2013. And the 2013 rate is less than half the 2010 rate of 29%. This project has been so successful the Coalition is expanding its scope to local School Readiness Programs where the rate of chronic absenteeism is higher than in the K-12 system. New Britain has been recognized for this effort nationally by The Casey Foundation and The Campaign for Grade Level Reading. It is the primary reason the city was named a National Pacesetter by The National League of Cities; an award for which it is again being considered.
- A groundbreaking, non-traditional **Summer School Program** called Summer SEE. The Coalition facilitated a partnership between the School District and Community Based Organizations to offer a summer school experience to the lowest scoring students in the District. A combination of the traditional summer classroom experience coupled with aligned enrichment activities, outcomes related

to SEE indicate the program significantly reduces the impact of Summer Learning Loss. Summer Learning Loss is a phenomenon that negatively impacts poor children who don't have access to summer enrichment and sets the stage for an increasing skills gap between them and more affluent peers. It is often the principle reason that poor children find themselves on a trajectory to dropping out of school. Students who participate in SEE are less likely to suffer Summer Learning Loss than non-participating peers, less likely to exhibit behaviors that remove them from the classroom for discipline than non-participating peers, and show gains in specific literacy development skills after participation. This model is of such high interest to other districts hoping to replicate it, that New Britain representatives have been asked to present at National Conferences in Texas, Washington DC, Indianapolis, and in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

- **Community-wide anti-obesity work** that has tracked rates of obesity in children enrolled in New Britain School Readiness and Headstart classrooms; almost 80% of our incoming kindergarten class. A variety of targeted strategies indicate the city is making progress in reducing the percentage of children who are obese, a factor that recently drew the attention of and was highlighted by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

I also request that funding for after school, particularly the Priority School District Grants: Extended School Hours and Summer School Grants be restored. National and state research substantiates what we have observed in our Coalition work, that summer and after school programs improve outcomes for children, particularly poor children. Elimination of this funding will dismantle the Summer SEE initiative and our efforts to apply what we have learned in the summer to our after school programming community-wide. These funds support programs to more than **490 New Britain youth** during the school year.

I request that you support the efforts to increase salaries for Early Childhood teachers. To increase quality (an effort we support) qualifications for School Readiness Teachers have steadily increased, however, the ability to substantially increase pay has not. As a result, students are not being attracted to the field of Early Childhood and a shortage of qualified, credentialed professionals is looming at the time that legislation requires agencies to hire and populate classrooms with those with a Bachelor's degree. Only sufficient funding to align pay in this industry with that of teachers in the K-12 system will have any dramatic impact on improving this situation. Current funding continues to support pay levels that in many cases make teachers eligible for public programs, like SNAP, TANF and Husky.

Finally, I hope that you support funding for these other initiatives that have a positive impact on New Britain children and families:

- School Readiness Quality Enhancement funds reduced by 5%
- Parent leadership training programs - \$20,000 eliminated from the Parent Trust Fund
- Summer youth employment-reduced by \$2 million dollars

Thank you for your consideration of these requests. I can be reached for questions at tmadhen@ywcanewbritain.org.