

Testimony: Yamuna Menon, Director of Research & Policy ConnCAN
Joint Committee on Appropriations Public Hearing
Tuesday, March 2, 2015

Good afternoon Senator Bye and Representative Walker. My name is Yamuna Menon and I am the Director of Research & Policy at Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, or ConnCAN.

ConnCAN is committed to supporting policies that will lead to excellent schools for every child, regardless of race, zip code, or family income. We know that great schools can transform children's lives and ensure the long-term economic prosperity of Connecticut. That's why we must deliver on the promise of an excellent public education for all children, now.

Our ability to do so depends on how you choose to move forward on the Governor's budget proposal.

To build upon the progress we've made in recent years, we urge you and the General Assembly to invest in Connecticut's children by maintaining and improving upon the Governor's education budget proposal by allocating funding for initiatives that will:

- Sustain implementation of the new educator evaluation system and Common Core State Standards to ensure the best people are leading our classrooms and schools and that kids have rigorous standards that will prepare them for success in college and career.
- Improve the way we recruit and prepare teachers and principals to ensure that a diverse workforce of only the best educators make it into our schools. We can do this by holding preparation programs accountable for the quality and effectiveness of the graduates they produce.
- Create an integrated and equitable Early Childhood Education program that not only ensures the quality of programs, but also provides parents the information they need to choose the best options for their children.
- Ensure that children who have chosen public charters schools can remain in their school, and that Connecticut keeps our commitment to communities by funding the two public charter schools that have already been approved.
- Continue investing in turning around our lowest performing schools. Critical to this work is the Commissioner's Network, which we believe has the potential to dramatically improve student outcomes, especially for our students who need the most support. The Commissioner's Network has been a promising start towards ensuring that students in our lowest performing schools have the opportunity to receive the great education they deserve.

If we are to continue investing in the Commissioner's Network, we must make common sense policy changes to dramatically improve the performance of the program and make sure that the state's long term investment in the program is a success.

This includes:

1. Prioritizing and intervening in the state's lowest performing schools
2. Removing the caps on the number of schools per district and overall.
3. Providing a standard block of waivers to Network schools that include full autonomy in staffing, scheduling, budgeting, and programming.
4. Changing the membership of turnaround committees to ensure they include turnaround expertise as well as parent and community representation.
5. Recruiting effective turnaround leaders and operators to work in the Commissioner's Network through an annual state review and pre-approval process.
6. Setting standards for performance on annual and interim achievement assessments and leading indicators of turnaround success.
7. Streamlining the turnaround plan development process by ensuring that the state sets clear parameters for turnaround models;
8. And finally, allowing successful schools the option to stay in the Network with ongoing autonomy and accountability, and allowing the state to appoint a proven turnaround leader, lead partner, or organization to operate unsuccessful schools in the Network.

For more detail, please refer to ConnCAN's school turnaround report, entitled "Addressing Connecticut's Education: Improving Turnaround Measures for Our Lowest Performing Schools." that accompanied my testimony.

Finally, we urge you to fix our fundamentally broken school funding system, which fails to fund all kids equitably across all towns and school types. As the foundation of our education system, our funding system shines a spotlight on our reliance on short-term fixes that require us to have the same debates year after year and that only offer us either/or choices. We should be able to provide parents and families with the high-quality options they want, while providing our traditional public schools with the support they need to be successful. It's time to move away from false choices and move our education system forward to provide all our students with the education they deserve.

We must come together, as we have in the past, to put children front and center and use every resource we have at our disposal to make their success our number one priority—from charters to turnarounds and early childhood education to teacher and principal preparation. We know this will require tough decisions, but today, and in the coming weeks, we will need your leadership to protect the progress we've made and ensure we are able to build upon that work to ensure excellent schools and a bright future for all of Connecticut's children.

Thank you.