

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Education
Connecticut General Assembly

Kelvin Roldán
Chief Communications and Public Policy Officer, Hartford Public Schools

and

Representative Juan Candelaria

Co-Chairs, Speaker's English Language Learners and
Educational Equity Task Force

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Co-Chairs Slossberg and Fleischmann, Vice Chairs Winfield and Sanchez, Ranking Members Winfield and Boucher, and honorable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am here to speak in support of Raised Bill No. 6835, An Act Concerning English Language Learners. I am here before you as Co-Chair of the Speaker's Task Force on English Language Learners and Educational Equity Task Force.

Although the Speaker's task force has not completed its work, we felt it was important to come before you to share some of what we have learned thus far and potential direction. As soon as we complete our work, which will be at the end of this month, we will provide you with our recommendations. This is a very thoughtful group that is composed of teachers, administrators, national and local language acquisition experts, parents, and many of your colleagues.

As a former ELL student in Hartford Public Schools, I have a very personal and particular perspective on this issue. These are the students that the education reform movement has left behind and truly highlight the pernicious achievement gap that is so real in the State of Connecticut.

Here's what we learned thus far:

- There are currently 34,851 English Learners identified students in our state. This number represents a growth of 15% as compared to 2011-2012. These students are educated across the state but are concentrated in some of our neediest places. Hartford and New Haven have the most significant ELL student populations. Of the 34,851 students, 4,812 are not receiving any services at all. (See Attachment)
- 10,000 students are receiving bilingual support, 13,000 ESL, 5,500 transition support services and over 6,000 students are not receiving services at all.
- Although the number of students and need has grown, the resources have not.

We currently spend \$1.9 million annually in ELL/Bilingual education. Imagine having what is the equivalent of the largest school district in the state and only spending only \$1.9 million (\$54.52 per child). This is clearly inadequate and insufficient.

- The state Department of Education is poorly equipped to provide leadership and adequate support to districts across the state. Although the staff is truly committed, one staff person is not enough to support 167 school districts.
- Very few students transition within the 30-month period of bilingual education. Research shows that it can take 5 to 6 years for a student to reach a grade level achievement of academic English. However, moving the timeline without articulating standards is not practical. There is a need for standards for students in the program and after exiting the program.
- Given the nature of resources and staffing, we can only assume that numerous districts may not be meeting the state/federal obligation to provide adequate supports to EL students.
- There is a need to identify and clearly define the different types of language acquisition programs and clearly articulate supports at the state level.
- We know that RESCS can and should play a role, particularly in low-frequency districts. We need to define and adequately resource that function.
- We have a bilingual/ELL teacher shortage. There is a need to include our teacher credentialing organizations in helping address this shortage and in addressing the capacity/skills and knowledge of our teaching workforce. In addition, the task force has discussed the need for professional development for not only ESL teachers but also content area teachers.
- When an ELL student is taking a standardized test, in our case the pending SBAC, he/she is grappling with the English language, not content. In order for us to arrive at a true baseline, we need to do testing in the native language of the student. Many of our students come well prepared from their respective homes, while do not appear to have had a formal education as defined by our own experiences. However, we do not necessarily know the level of preparation of the student, because they do not have the opportunity to truly work on content due to the fact that they are taking the test in English.

It would be ideal if we could address all the issues this year. But in order to address the achievement gap that is very real for our English Learners, we will at least need to tackle the teacher capacity issues, professional development, resources, and accountability. I am grateful to you and Speaker of the House Sharkey for taking the first step. Thank you.