

Testimony of Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, Ed.D.

Superintendent

Hartford Public Schools

Education Committee
Connecticut General Assembly

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Co-Chairs Senator Slossberg and Representative Fleischmann, Vice-Chairs Senator Winfield and Representative Sanchez, Ranking Members Senator Boucher and Rep. Lavielle, and distinguished members of the Education Committee.

My name is Dr. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools.

Hartford Public Schools wishes to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you in support of Raised Bill 6835, An Act Concerning English Language Learners, a proposed measure that affects a significant portion of our student population.

Hartford Public Schools has the largest concentration of English Language Learners in Connecticut by far -- 17.7% of the total the student population, or 3,700 students. The state average is 5 percent. Thirty-five of our 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 and practice on the delivery of adequate services.

This year, for example, our district is piloting a new approach to ELL education in partnership with Middlebury Interactive Languages that promises to enable more ELL students to prepare for college and career success. The early response to the program from the 300 participating ELL students has been very encouraging. Students have been energized to learn English quickly as they develop academic discourse and, in some cases, are surpassing their English-speaking counterparts on core knowledge assessments.

The part of Raised Bill 6835 that would most directly benefit Hartford Public School students is the provision that increases the amount of time that an English Language Learning student spends in a bilingual education program from 30 months to 60 months. As many of you know, our district has been advocating for this change for many legislative sessions because there exists a large body of research, showing that it takes five years for ELL students to reach proficiency in English depending on the grade level and strength of 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, helps close the achievement gap.

However, extending the time without articulating standards for what is expected during those 60 months will not ensure English language acquisition.

We have also recommended lengthening Connecticut's 10-month ELL exemption from taking state reading/language arts assessments to 30 months and providing an opportunity for ELL students to take standardized tests in their native language, as a better indicator of their skills and knowledge.

Despite our significant history with the ELL student population, our efforts to persuade the General Assembly to pass such legislation have unfortunately not met with success.

The part of Raised Bill 6835 that might present some difficulty is the provision that flatly lowers the minimum number of ELL students that must be enrolled in a school – from 20 to six – before the district is required to provide them with a bilingual program. We have over 70 languages represented in our district. Although this position is clearly well intentioned, it makes no provision for funding the multiplicity of programs that would have to emerge if the bill passed. Bilingual programs are severely underfunded as it is.

I also want to take a moment to commend Speaker Sharkey for appointing a task force that is studying ELL issues in great detail.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to working with you as the bill moves forward in the process.