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Testimony before the Education Committee

by Helen Koulidobrova, Assistant Professor in Linguistics/TESOL, in collaboration with the Center for Public Policy & Social Research/Governor William A. O'Neill Endowed Chair Sen. Eileen Daily, Central Connecticut State University

Thank you, distinguished members of the Education Committee for allowing me to speak at this Public Hearing of Raised Bills. My testimony pertains to the sections of the report addressing the needs of English language learners – Bills 6835 (An Act Concerning English Language Learners) and 965 (An Act Concerning Education Issues).

My name is Dr. Helen Koulidobrova, and I am an Assistant Professor in Linguistics/TESOL at Central Connecticut State University. I teach within the post-baccalaureate teacher certification and Master's programs, the sole purpose of which is the preparation of teachers for speakers of other languages (TESOL). I am also a linguist, an experienced ESL teacher and competent user of 4 languages (spoken and signed); English is not my first language. Finally, I represent Connecticut Colleges and Universities on the bipartisan Language Acquisition and Educational Equity Workgroup initiated by Speaker Sharke. My credentials allow me to reflect on the content of the bills in front of you Force and speak on behalf the CCSU TESOL program as well as partnering faculty within the Connecticut Institutions of Higher Education (Eastern, Southern, and Western State Universities as well as University of Connecticut).

According to the Migration Policy Institute analysis for 2006-2008, US pre-K-12 school systems contained 5,300,000 English language learners (ELLs); this means that more than 1 in 10 US students is a non-native English user. In K-5, more than 75% of these children are 2nd- or 3rd-generation Americans. In other words, when we address the needs of English language learners, we are addressing the needs of our neighbors – people whose families have always lived 'next door.' When we further the opportunities for the English language learners in CT, we are affecting the economy of the state in a non-trivial manner.

According to the latest CT State Department of Education report, CT is home to 538,356 students, of whom 73,905 consider a language other than English to be dominant. That is 13% of individuals growing up in CT public schools possess a skill which has inherent potential to advance the US as a global partner – the inside knowledge of other cultures, which has been shown to lead to successful establishment of economic ties globally. Of these children, 66.5% are identified as English language learners. This means that their overall proficiency in English is not sufficient for a typical CT classroom, pre-K-12. Many of the ELL children are in pre-K and kindergartens. Due to the myth that as long as additional language learning begins before puberty, it will be successful, a large number of young ELLs (age 3-5) do not receive services at

all. Unfortunately, this necessarily leads to lower performance rates throughout their entire academic experience—a child who cannot compete in early and elementary education for language-related reasons will remain behind native English users throughout his/her career. According to CMT and CAPT results in 2011, these students underperformed by 26-59% in Math and 40-50% in Reading (depending on the test). Here is what this means: individuals who otherwise would have been able to lead the CT economy, simply by virtue of having knowledge of another language and culture, may never do so: among English language learners in CT, graduating rate is 60.1%, which is 15% lower than that of non-ELLs. In addition, many of these students do not receive services at all, for a variety of reasons, one of which is frequent mislabeling and stigma attached. Among ELLs, a higher percentage is more likely to be disciplined in schools, irrespective of the cause. A large number requires multiple services: 79% of English language learners are eligible for reduced or free meals (in sharp contrast to only one-third of non-ELLs); about 15.8% of ELLs are identified as in need of Special Education services, out of which only 17.6% are identified for disabilities related to language. Admittedly, the latter number is deceiving: many language-related impairments remain undiagnosed, simply because language professionals have no tools to discriminate effects of linguistic impairments from effects of second language learning.

These numbers I presented before the Achievement Gap Taskforce in April 2014. Six months have passed. Despite fervent actions on behalf of various stakeholders, the issues not only remain but have (potentially) exacerbated: according to the recent CSDE report, the number of identified non-native English learners in CT K-12 schools has increased by over 5,000. All of these children have at least two basic rights: (i) to access of instruction and services they are entitled to by the Civil Rights Act and, close to 20% or them, by the Americans with Disabilities Act, and (ii) to fostering of dignity that comes with respect for their native language – something that those of us whose languages have never been denied tend to take for granted.

But then again, you all are undoubtedly aware that this problem exists, hence the bills under discussion today. So let me make myself clear: what is needed is a concrete solution to the widest achievement gap in the Union. One part of such solution is promoting linguistic diversity of represented by all 169 languages in CT K-12 schools, and not only in those where 20 or more language users call their educational home. This may very well mean that schools with substantially smaller number of bilingual students need to come together and develop a regional-based programs for English Language Learners. Another part of the solution lies in the currently implied oppression of CT English Language Learners. When a district, or a school, is penalized for opening its doors to cultural and linguistic diversity (that is, the necessarily low scores on assessments directly resulting from inability to access the language of the assessment), the state sends a clear message to multilingual individuals: your knowledge of more than one language may eventually bring revenue to CT (after all, according to the Financial Times – the Wall Street Journal of the United Kingdom, its monolingualism cost the UK 3-7% of all export revenue. This roughly translates into an exorbitant figure over 3 billion pounds), but only if you pull yourself by the bootstraps and pass for a native English speaker, to reflect on the writings of Booker T. Washington. Yet another path to the solution lies in ensuring that each English Language Learner receives language instruction from a certified English as a Second Language teacher directly, per the letter of the law. This would ensure that those who administer both instruction and language assessment are equipped with making the decisions regarding the profile of English Language learning student, in each of the CT school, and in each of its

districts. How then are with to close the already present teacher shortage? In collaboration with the CCSU Department of Modern Languages and the School of Education and Professional Programs, I am prepared to give you an answer: a certified content teacher with TESOL certification, the proof of knowledge of another language and a mandatory course in multilingual matters will fill the current teacher void: after all, the only person even minimally equipped with disentangling the complexities of profiling English Language Learners in CT is an ESL-certified teacher, whose training involved linguistic analysis, methods in language teaching, methods in language assessment, interactions of language and culture, student data collection and interpretation, and so forth. This is whom we as the state need to step in the time of the current education crisis. Finally, both the needs and the progress of CT multilingual K-12 students will lie outside of the public eye and remain the frustrating reality of those in the know until we see an annual study and, thus, an opportunity of public examination of the school profiles.

The official seal of CT states: *‘Qui transtulit sustinet’* – ‘the one that transplants sustains.’ As the statistics demonstrate, a vast number of individuals in this state are transplants who are now sustaining the state. However, their full potential remains underutilized. Multilingual children are the future of the global economy. Around 7,000 languages are used natively in the world, over 300 of them signed. Knowledge of another language has been shown to lead cultural sensitivity and the spirit of cooperation in both children and adults. As a scientist, I stand by fully bilingual and biliterate education – a move that will set emerging CT workforce, members of which are still children today, apart in the world whose borders are rapidly shifting. As a parent and a member of CT community, I stand by quality English education for multilinguals, which cannot happen without professionals carefully trained in just that. As a citizen, a mother of multilingual children in CT schools, as a teacher of teachers, as a researcher and a member of the Language Acquisition and Educational Equity taskforce, I encourage you to pay careful attention to the implications of the bills in front of you today.

I appreciate your time and attention and look forward to your questions.

Recommendations For Closing The Bilingual Educator Shortage And Improving The Quality Of Bilingual Education In CT

Developed by Helen Koulidobrova (CCSU) in collaboration with the CCSU TESOL program (Department of English), School of Education and Professional Services, and Department of Modern Languages

I. *Proposal*: We propose the following Bilingual Education credentials:

1. Endorsement in the content area
2. Endorsement in TESOL
3. Obligatory course in Bilingualism
4. Proof of language proficiency in English and the target language (ACTFL)
5. An obligatory course in the target language as it relates to the content area

II. *Rationale*: In addition to the ability to perform in a language additional to English, educators certified as ‘bilingual’ must be equipped not only with the knowledge of academic content but also with the knowledge of multilingual processes and subsequent language acquisition. In particular:

- All children enrolled in the US public schools are eligible to direct instruction by a TESOL-certified teacher (federal Civil Rights Act)
- CT, unlike many other states, protects the right of bilingual children to begin accessing academic material in their native language initially but then are expected to transition into the ESL program
- According to the CT State Department of Education:
 1. 73,905 children in Connecticut consider a language other than English dominant;
 2. as of 10/1/2013, almost 30% of open positions requiring bilingual certification remained vacant and only 58% of new bilingual hires were considered ‘minimally qualified.’
- And because of:
 1. the current shortage of post-baccalaureate/Master’s level programs in bilingual education
 2. the intermittent quality of already existing bilingual instruction in CT
 3. periodic shortage of certified ESL teachers in public schools