

Testimony Supporting H.B. 6835: An Act Concerning English Language Learners

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Education Committee

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Representative Fleischmann, Senator Slossberg, and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee,

I am the Education Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

I am testifying on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children in support of H.B. 6835: An Act Concerning English Language Learners. In too many of Connecticut's public schools, students who do not speak English as their native language face exceptional challenges to educational and ultimate life success. The bill makes several modifications to current law that will improve bilingual education for children in the state's public schools.

We specifically support the following provisions of the bill:

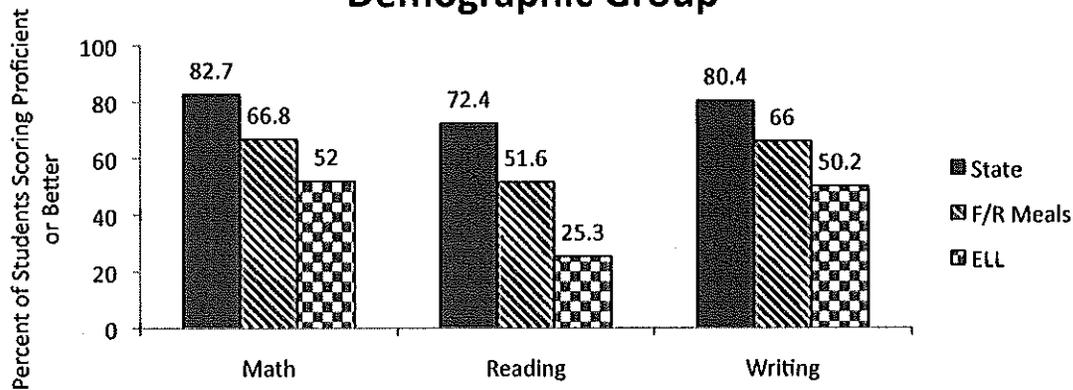
- Section b: Boards of education must provide a program of bilingual education for each eligible student in a schools where at least 6 or more students identified as ELL are present
- Section d: Boards of education shall limit time spent in a bilingual education program to sixty months

Enrollment of English Language Learners (ELL) in Connecticut public schools is growing. In 2002, approximately 23,000 students were classified as ELLs.¹ As of the 2013-2014 school year, over 31,000 students are classified as ELLs. There is evidence that ELLs are at a substantial academic disadvantage: in 2012-2013, students identified as ELL were less likely to score "proficient" or better on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) than both the average Connecticut student and the average low-income student eligible for Free or Reduce Price Meals (F/R Meals).²

¹ Condition of Education 2010-2011, Connecticut State Department of Education, <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/EvalResearch/COE1011.pdf>

² CT Voices for Children's analysis of publicly available CMT data, downloaded from the SDE CMT data interaction. Analyses available upon request.

Figure 1: 3rd Grade CMT Scores by Demographic Group



H.B. 6835 will require schools that enroll six or more ELL students to offer each student a program of bilingual education. Under current law, if a student identified as ELL attends a school with fewer than 20 peers identified as ELL, they may receive no bilingual instruction regardless of their need for this instruction or their level of English fluency. In the 2012-2013 school year (the most recent year for which data were available) over 4,000 students identified as ELL attended a school with fewer than 20 ELL students. This was about 14% of all ELL students who likely had no access to bilingual education. By contrast, had H.B. 6835 been in effect at that time, only about 3% of all ELL students would have attended schools that were not required to offer bilingual education (because they enrolled fewer than 6 ELL students); nearly 3,500 more students would have received language-appropriate instruction.³ Since ELL enrollment has grown since the 2012-2013 school year, the effect of the proposed bill may be even greater in 2015-2016.

H.B. 6835 will also double the amount of time that ELL students may receive support for acquisition of the English language (from 30 to 60 months). After only 30 months, students may have mastered conversational English but are still far from ready to handle the cognitively deep task of reading works of literature or history in English. This bill stands to extend important educational opportunities to students as they develop competence and confidence in the English language.

The proposed bill does not clearly address staffing in the state’s bilingual education programs. While the current statute requires a certified bilingual educator in the classroom, H.B. 6835 proposes permitting districts that are struggling to staff their programs to hire certified teachers of English as a second language instead. Certified bilingual educators use ELLs’ native language in general instruction, helping ELLs connect to existing material in their native language as they work towards mastery of English. This approach deepens students’ connections to the curriculum and is preferable to ESL instruction where students engage in intensive English instruction without incorporating their native languages. The State statute must specify a finite timetable within which districts must staff their programs appropriately with certified bilingual instructors.

³ See, CT Voices analysis of SDE enrollment data. Available upon request.
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Finally, as we expand access to ELL services and extend the length of time students utilize ELL supports, we must simultaneously explore a deeper commitment to true bilingual education models that honor students' native language skills while developing mastery of a new language. Best practices suggest that leveraging ELLs' fluency in their native language to learn and master English in a true dual-immersion setting leads to stronger academic outcomes for ELL students.⁴ We must find ways to honor ELLs' heritage and culture while simultaneously leveraging their native language skills to help them excel in the classroom.

For children who may have grown up with a different native language, learning English in school is often an extraordinary challenge. This bill takes affirmative steps to more adequately support and educate our ELL students. **We urge the committee to support H.B. 6835, so many more ELL students receive appropriate instruction that meets their educational needs and prepares them for academic success.**

Thank for your time and for the opportunity to submit testimony.

⁴ Eaton, Susan. "Have We Learned Our Language Lesson? In Spite of Massachusetts' Decade-Old English-only Law, Two-Way Bilingual Programs Demonstrate Promise and Enjoy Enduring Prosperity." One Nation Undivided. <http://www.onenationindivisible.org/wzp-content/uploads/2012/06/ONISTORY4LanguageLessonV4.pdf>
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