

Jennifer Alexander, Chief Executive Officer, ConnCAN
Written Testimony to the Joint Committee on Education Public Hearing
Wednesday, March 11, 2015

Good afternoon, Chairman Fleischmann and Chairwoman Slossberg and distinguished members of the Education committee. My name is Jennifer Alexander and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN). ConnCAN is committed to promoting student-centered policies that ensure all children have access to an excellent education, regardless of race, zip code or family income.

In recent years, thanks to the work of this committee and to the work of educators throughout the state, we've taken promising steps to expand success and opportunity to all Connecticut children.

The results of this work can be seen in schools across the state--schools of all kinds--where children are receiving the tools and support they need and are achieving at high-levels. In particular, we are encouraged that some schools are delivering a high-quality education to our most vulnerable students of color and students from low-income families. These schools are proving that, when given a supportive learning environment, children will rise to our highest expectations.

Yet, as you know, far too many of Connecticut's students do not have this experience. Instead, nearly 40,000 students attend schools that are chronically and persistently low-performing and Connecticut continues to struggle with the largest achievement gap in the country.

While we have made some progress towards delivering on the promise of a great public education for all students, we have a long way to go. With this reality in mind, I submit testimony on House Bills 6977 and 6974.

One of the most important jobs in our state is that of overseeing our state's education system. Connecticut's Commissioner of Education is responsible for making sure that our schools are centers of excellence; our teachers are able to meet the challenges of the classroom; our school and district leaders can forge ahead; and ultimately that students are achieving success.

To ensure that we remain able to recruit the most talented individuals to our state's top education posts, we ask the Connecticut General Assembly to reject HB 6977 and the qualifications set forth therein. While we appreciate the intent of HB 6977, to put in place minimum hiring standards and a preference for a strong education background for one of our state's most important posts, we believe these requirements would severely limit our state's ability to recruit talent and would unnecessarily exclude qualified and experienced candidates from being considered for appointment as Education Commissioner.

For example, HB 6977 would exclude an excellent candidate such as Kevin Huffman, who recently stepped down as Tennessee's education commissioner, and oversaw significant growth and achievement gains for Tennessee during his tenure, simply because he lacks a higher degree in an education-related field. Similarly, current Colorado Education Commissioner Robert Hammond, who has led key initiatives to improve educator evaluation

and implement the Common Core standards, would be disqualified from the job. Regardless of his 24 years of experience in education leadership, Commissioner Hammond would be excluded from consideration, solely because he lacks a higher degree in an education-related field. This simply makes no sense and means that we would be excluding qualified candidates based on arbitrary criteria that do not speak to a candidate's real skills or experience.

To ensure we are attracting the best candidates, we must have rigorous standards for employment, but we must also make sure that our state has the ability to recruit and hire based upon expertise gained through a variety of experiences. Unfortunately, HB 6977 fails to set up rigorous standards while simultaneously placing significant barriers to attracting the best candidates possible.

Just as important to making sure we have a highly-qualified and dedicated professional overseeing our state's education system is ensuring that our youngest students have the skills needed for success in later grades. Key to this success is K-3 literacy.

Research has shown that early literacy development is especially crucial and that the achievement gap can begin as soon as a child is 18 months old. Furthermore, children who are not proficient in reading by the end of third grade are far less likely to graduate from high school and far less likely to have the skills they need prepare them for a successful career. To ensure the future success of our students, as well as the future prosperity of our state, we must improve early literacy instruction and teacher preparation to truly give our children a strong start.

Right now, however, far too many children of color and children in poverty in our state are not reading on grade level by the end of grade three. While promising steps have been taken to improve early learning and literacy efforts, thanks to strong legislative support from the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, we still have a long way to go.

Given the importance of early literacy, we support HB 6974 and ask that the Education Committee and the General Assembly go even further to ensure the literacy of our youngest students by:

- Incentivizing and prioritizing K-3 literacy efforts within the current Alliance Districts program to encourage districts to provide effective resources, including professional development and specific programs to boost K-3 literacy and strengthen of early reading supports and early reading interventions.
- Requiring teacher preparation programs to offer more robust programs on early reading and literacy instruction with specific instruction in such areas as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and interventions for struggling readers.
- Offering additional professional development and mentoring to support differentiated early reading instruction either at the state level or incentivizing districts to do so via Alliance District grants or other competitive grants.
- Revisiting the legislation that changed the requirement for certified K-3 teachers to complete an annual early reading instruction practice. Currently the results from this test are a "survey" that is exempt from release under FOIA and specifies that the results not be included as part of the teacher evaluation system.

The continued progress of Connecticut's education system, and the future of our state, depend on our ability to ensure we have highly qualified professionals overseeing our schools and system at-large and our ability to ensure success from the earliest ages. We are depending upon you to set our state up for success by rejecting HB 6977 and building upon HB 6974 to give our students a strong leader and a strong start.

Thank you.