

**Testimony of Yamuna Menon, Director of Research & Policy, ConnCAN**  
*Joint Committee on Education Public Hearing*  
*Wednesday, February 25, 2015*

Re: SB 942: AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GOVERNOR  
CONCERNING EDUCATION

Good afternoon Chairman Fleischmann and Chairwoman Slossberg. My name is Yamuna Menon and I am the Director of Research & Policy at ConnCAN. ConnCAN is committed to supporting policies that will lead to excellent schools for every child, regardless of race, wealth and zip code.

In recent years, we've made real progress toward ensuring our kids have access to the schools and education they deserve and would like to thank you and the rest of the committee for your part in moving us forward. Yet, far too many of our children still attend schools where they have a greater likelihood of going to prison than to college, which means we still have work to do.

Critical to this work is the Commissioner's Network, which we believe has the potential to dramatically improve student outcomes, especially for our students most in need of support.

As we have from the start, ConnCAN supports the state's effort to turn around our lowest performing schools through the Commissioner's Network and we support the changes proposed via Senate Bill 942, which lift the cap on the number of schools participating from a given city.

While we support this bill, ConnCAN also believes additional changes will make this critical program even stronger. We hold this view based upon our most recent report, "*Addressing Connecticut's Education: Improving Turnaround Measures for Our Lowest Performing Schools.*" This report reviews turnaround efforts across the country that have made significant progress in turning around their lowest performing schools and can serve as models for improving Connecticut's turnaround program.

These programs, located in Louisiana, Massachusetts and Tennessee, and the Philadelphia school district reveal the possibilities for the Commissioner's Network and the large gains that students can achieve when a turnaround is successful. With the right policy, operating conditions, and school leaders and models in place, there can be bold, transformational changes in student achievement. Adapting key policy lessons borrowed from these programs would enable educators to more quickly and effectively improve schools, and ensure significant benefit to maximize the state's significant investment of resources into this program.

The first model we can learn from is Massachusetts's program. The UP Education Network of turnaround schools is making amazing gains for students across the state. For example, UP Academy Boston ranked first in the state for three years in a row for student growth in math at the middle school level on the state's academic performance test. And, UP Academy

Dorchester made the highest one-year increase in Math and English MCAS proficiency in Massachusetts's history, with a combined increase of 73 percentage points. The school also ranked first in the state for academic growth in math for all elementary, middle, and high schools.

Schools in Tennessee's Achievement School District are also seeing gains. In only its second year (2013-2014) of turnaround, participating schools have outpaced the state in student growth for both reading and math for grades 3-8 on the state assessment.

Also, in Philadelphia's turnaround efforts, through a partnership with Mastery Charter Schools, schools within the district's turnaround program now have a 93% student retention rate and an 80% decrease in violence. Additionally, more than 96% of the Mastery Charter Class of 2014 earned college and/or post-secondary acceptance, and data suggests that results are not only sustainable, they improve over time.

**Learning from promising programs from across the country, we have the opportunity to make commonsense policy changes to maximize the impact of the Commissioner's Network and bring about transformational change for the 40,000 students that attend chronically low-performing schools in our state.**

Thus, ConnCAN recommends the Connecticut General Assembly consider the following additional changes to the Commissioner's Network:

1. Prioritize and intervene in the state's lowest performing schools.
2. Remove the caps on the number of schools that can be selected per district and overall.
3. Provide a standard block of waivers to Network schools that includes full autonomy in staffing, scheduling, budgeting, and programming.
4. Change the membership of turnaround committees to ensure they include turnaround expertise and parent and community representation.
5. Recruit effective turnaround leaders and operators to work in the Commissioner's Network through an annual state review and pre-approval process.
6. Set standards for performance on annual and interim achievement assessments and leading indicators of turnaround success.
7. Streamline the turnaround plan development process by ensuring the state sets clear parameters for turnaround models; turnaround committees take one consensus vote on the plan prior to submitting it to the state; and the Commissioner retains authority to approve or deny the turnaround plan.
8. Allow successful schools the option to stay in the Network with ongoing autonomy and accountability, and allow the state to appoint a proven turnaround leader, lead partner, or organization to operate unsuccessful schools in the Network.

All of these changes are sensible and will more efficiently utilize the monies currently allocated to this program, but they have the potential to quickly and dramatically improve the performance of the Commissioner's Network program for our children who are most in need.

In recent years we've made progress that we can be proud of, and we still have a long way to go. We need you to continue to lead and act boldly to ensure bright and successful futures are a possibility for all of Connecticut's children.