



Joint Committee on Education
March 11, 2015, Public Hearing on Senate Bill 1055
AN ACT CONCERNING GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

Testimony by Ann Means, Executive Director
Connecticut Association for the Gifted (“CAG”)

Co-Chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Education Committee, on behalf of the Connecticut Association for the Gifted I would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the *Raised Bill 1055, AN ACT CONCERNING GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS*.

My name is Ann Means and I am Executive Director of the Connecticut Association for the Gifted and a resident of Farmington. In the interest of saving time, we have limited our testimonies on this bill to only two people from our organization, John Pellino our President and myself.

CAG was established in 1969 and its membership is comprised of educators, parents, psychologists, and others. CAG’s mission is to advocate and work for the educational needs of high-ability students in our state so that they are properly identified and served. We receive no funding from the state – we are funded by our members’ dues and our events. I am here on behalf of our members to speak in support of Raised Bill 1055 with suggestions offered to improve it. This bill, with proper implementation, could significantly improve the quality of services being delivered to high potential students in our state.

Raised Senate Bill 1055 has two components. I’ll address them each in turn. Section 1 asks the Commissioner to designate an employee of the Department of Education to oversee and ensure the proper identification of students and coordination of services for gifted and talented children.

CAG strongly supports this important initiative. Gifted and Talented oversight at the State Department of Education ended in 2009, with the retirement of the person assigned to oversee it in the Bureau of Teaching and Learning. Identification of Gifted students in Connecticut is mandated under Special Education Law, and district data on the identification as well as programming is reported to the SDE. A report based on the district data provided to us by the Department is an appendix to my testimony. In the interest of time I won’t relate it now, but ask you to review it after the proceedings today.

According to the data self-reported by districts and collected by the Department, many districts in traditionally underserved communities do not identify or serve (provide programming) for gifted and talented students. There are gifted and talented students in every district and we know that unless the department is proactive and supportive in this process, bright children from traditionally underserved communities will continue to be missed, their needs overlooked and their potential contributions squandered. The mission of Connecticut’s State Board of Education is to ensure that each child shall have “equal opportunity to receive a suitable program of education experiences.” All gifted and talented children in our state, no matter the zip code of

their school, should receive a “suitable” education. Our State Department of Education should ensure that they do.

Given the state’s fiscal situation, we understand it may not be feasible to hire a new person, so we would welcome an existing employee, possessing appropriate background and skills, to be given the responsibility of gifted and talented program oversight as part of their work, at no additional cost to the Department. This position has remained unfilled for nearly six years, and districts need guidance and support in these efforts.

Section 2 of the bill would require the Department to study the extent of services to gifted and talented students in our state schools, and examine best practices on addressing the intellectual, social and emotional needs of these students. We support this recommendation. Most of us know those myths about about gifted and talented students’ being able to “make it on their own” because they are bright. This myth often has tragic consequences when we consider gifted and talented students growing up in communities where there is little or no awareness about their special needs and scant resources to meet them. Many of these students end up underperforming or leaving the educational system – placing their well-being and potential contributions at risk.

Gifted and talented students are considered under the state’s Special Education Law for a reason: they do have special needs. They require a different pacing to learn, different complexity and depth in their study materials, and they have different emotional needs. Evidence-based research confirms that both academic and social-emotional needs of these students need to be met if we want high potential children to succeed.

Additionally, research shows that best practices in gifted education, adjusted for pacing, depth and breadth of materials, are simply some of the best practices in differentiated instruction, period. Evidence-based practice shows that instructional strategies derived from gifted education are successful in raising the achievement of all students. As an added bonus, the study that the SDE would conduct pursuant to this bill could inform the more general awareness of what constitutes best practices in personalized education for all students.

With our full support for the bill, we would also like to recommend:

- That the person chosen to oversee the gifted and talented services have experience in working with such programs, students, parents, and teachers;
- That the study should include an inventory by school district of identification practices and the services provided to all students identified as gifted and talented. Further, the study should include an assessment of gifted and talented services by district according to “best practices” developed by the National Association for Gifted Children.
- That statewide and national educational organizations should be consulted to ensure that we do not “reinvent the wheel” in areas that have already been fully studied and well documented.

In conclusion, we believe that if passed, Raised Bill 1055 will ensure a more effective and meaningful implementation of the 2013 Education Reform Law and will significantly enhance the academic progress of ALL high-ability, high achieving students in our state. Thank you for your attention today.



Subject: Gifted and Talented Programming in Connecticut School Districts
 Title: The Race to the Middle: High-ability learners in Connecticut's cities fall behind
 Issued: February 13, 2015
 Contact: Ann Means, Executive Director, Connecticut Association for the Gifted

Question: While high-potential learners across Connecticut continue to lose ground, our urban children suffer most. How bad is it?

Answer: Pretty bad.

During the two year period from 2012-2014 the percentage of Connecticut Public School districts failing to identify a single child who has "extraordinary learning ability or outstanding talent" in violation of Connecticut General Statutes ¹ grew again, this time from 27% to 31%.² Inexplicably, during the 2013-2014 school year, Bridgeport, Norwich, Waterbury and Stamford

reported no such children within their cities.

According to this self-reported data, access and opportunity to appropriate education for these children has been severely restricted or totally eliminated in Connecticut's 17 Urban Districts. Our minority children are disproportionately affected by this failure to comply with state law.

The State Department of Education data for the school year 2013- 2014 shows 75% of the children enrolled in urban districts claimed to be American Indian, Asian American, Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or two or more Races. Only 25% of children in these same districts

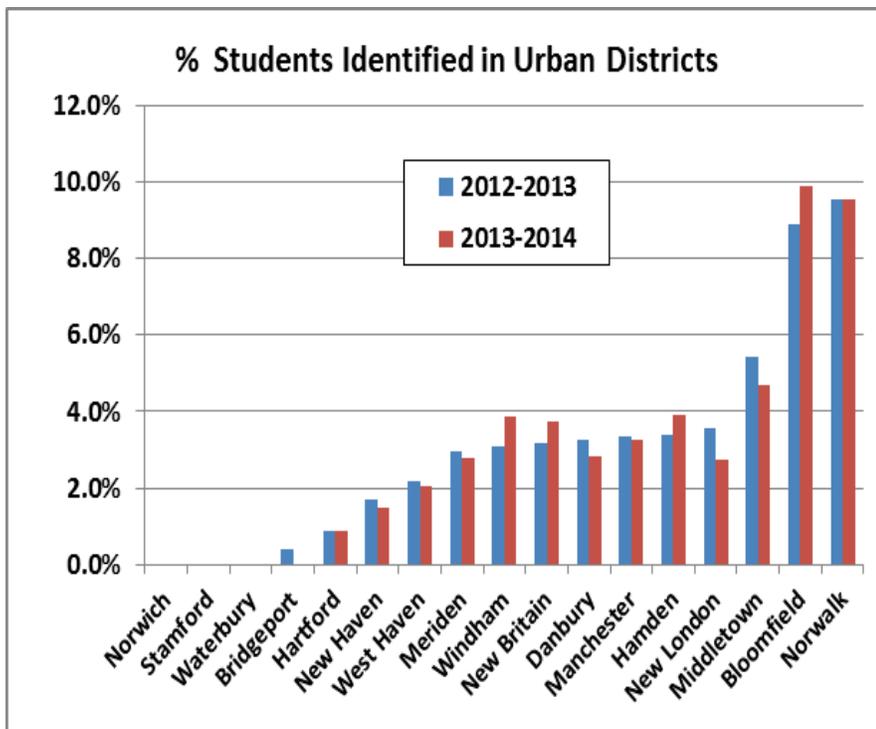


Figure 1 – Identification of G/T students in CT's 17 urban districts

indicated their racial identity as white. This means that for every white child not identified with high learning potential three children of color are missed.

Question: It's just in some of Connecticut's cities that our talented and high-potential learners are ignored, right?

Answer: Sadly, no. A majority of our districts offer no programming at all for these children.



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Almost two out of every three Connecticut children who are identified as having extraordinary learning abilities by their local district, receive no special programming, as shown in Figure 2. Most teachers are not prepared to address the needs of high potential learners in their classrooms. Nationally, 65% of teachers report that they had little or no preparation in their education and teacher preparation courses on how to best teach academically advanced students. Once employed in schools 58% say that they have had no professional development in the past few years focused on teaching academically advanced students.⁴

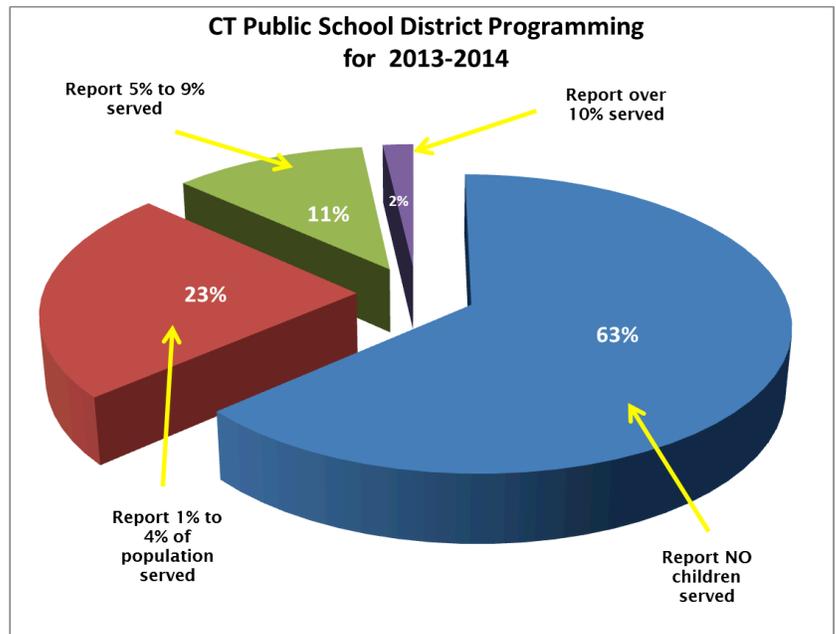


Figure 2 – CT Public Schools serving Children in 2013-2014

Although Connecticut has had some success in narrowing the Achievement Gap in recent years, the same cannot be said of the **Excellence Gap**, the divide between our highest achieving children and in the affluent suburbs and those in Connecticut's underserved urban districts. This trend has been seen nationally as program funding at state and local levels for talented and high-potential learners disappears. Connecticut, however, is one of only five states holding the dubious distinction of employing not a single person at the State Department of Education tasked with oversight of local district programs for high potential learners.⁵

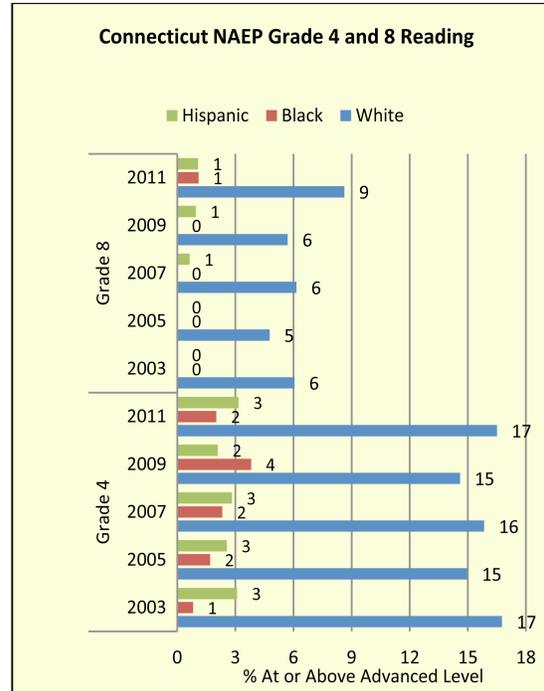
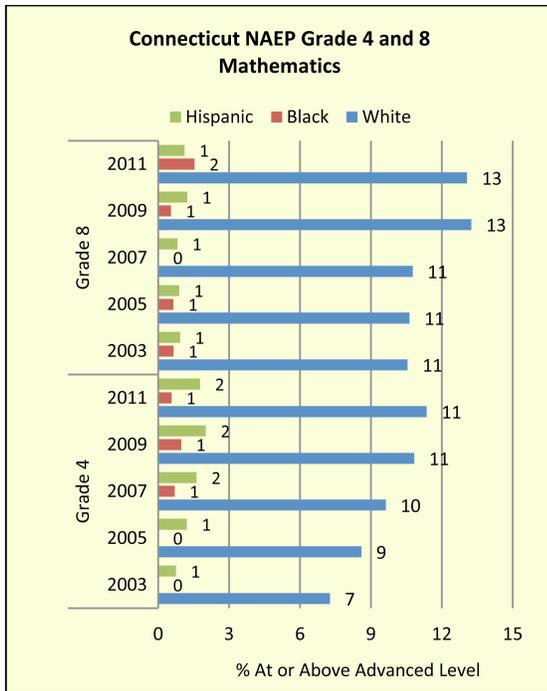
In Connecticut there has been a steady climb in the percentage of affluent, suburban children who achieve a score of "At or Above Advanced Level" in grades 4 and 8 in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).⁶ During the period from 2003 to math scores for high achieving Black and Hispanic students, often residing in under-resourced communities, were essentially flat (Figure 3). For the period from 2009 to 2011, the number of White children in Grade 4 reading "At or Above Advanced Level" increased overall by 13% while the total number of Grade 4 Black children reading at advanced level decreased by 50%. (Figure 4)

Question: So if scores for high-potential children in the suburbs are increasing when those living in under-resourced communities are flat or declining, that means...

Answer: that the Excellence Gap is only growing wider.



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Figures 3 and 4 – % at Advanced Level by Race/Ethnicity from 2003-2011⁷

Another way to evaluate individual student populations is by socio-economic status. Scores in NAEP assessments in reading and mathematics were examined for children who achieved “At or Above Advanced Level” scores. The difference in percentage achieving “Advanced Level” between who qualified for Free and Reduced Meals (FARM) and those who did not (Non-FARM) was plotted over time, from 2003 to 2011.

Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate how the Excellence Gap as measured in reading and mathematics advanced level scores is actually increasing over time in Connecticut. In 2003 a gap of 8 percentage points existed between numbers of 4th grade non-FARM and FARM children achieving at or above advanced level in mathematics. By 2011, that gap became 12 percentage points, growing 50% over the span of 8 years.

While the gap between those non-FARM and FARM children achieving at advanced levels in reading at 4th and 8th grades is increasing more slowly, it is still shows an upward trend. In other words, the situation is only getting worse. Even more can be inferred by examining the Excellence Gap between students of different socio-economic status. While the performance of our highest-achieving economically advantaged students is improving, our economically disadvantaged students are actually achieving in lower numbers.



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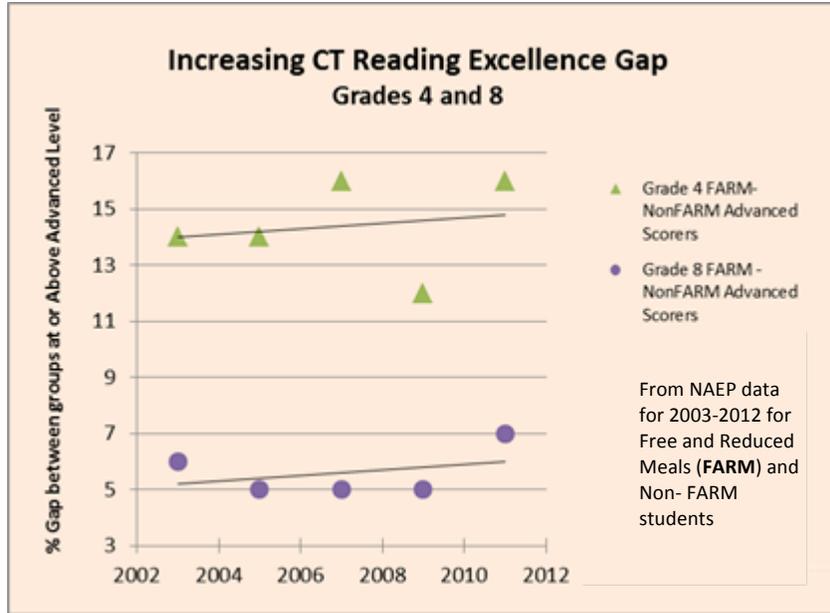


Figure 5 – Lower SES children falling behind higher income peers in reading

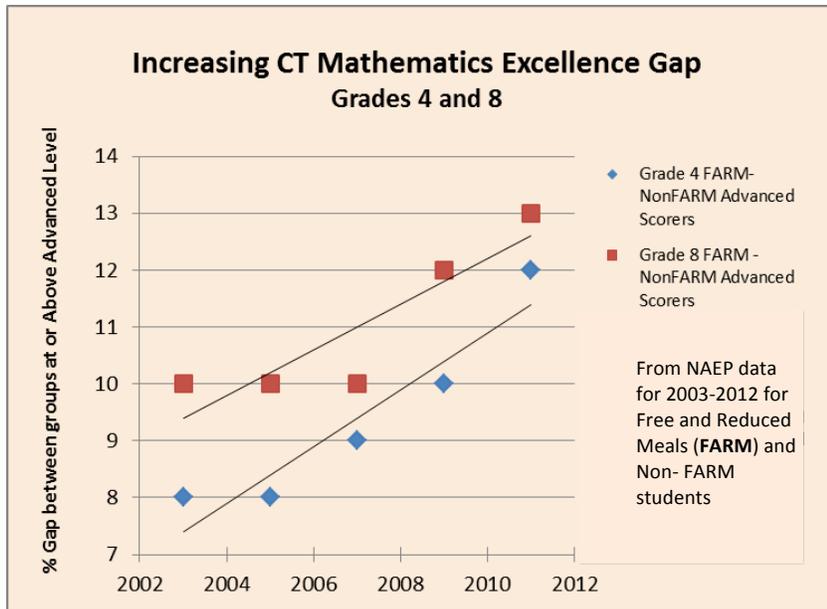


Figure 6 – Lower SES children falling behind higher income peers in mathematics



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Question: Can something be done to reverse this ominous trend?

Answer: Yes! Read on!

CAG is proposing a number steps which we can take to begin to shrink the Excellence Gap in our state. Namely, we are seeking support from the Education Committee to back legislation with the intent:

1. To designate a qualified person at the Connecticut State Department of Education to oversee identification and instruction of gifted and talented students.
2. To provide training in gifted and talented education to teachers, as part of their annual professional development.
3. To provide to all students in state teacher preparation programs a targeted training in methods of assessing, planning for and working effectively with gifted and talented children.

¹ CGS Section 10-76d(a)(1), Section 10-76a(5).

² PSIS data obtained from Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Data Collection, Research, and Evaluation.

³ Ibid.

⁴ National Association for Gifted Children and the National Council of Directors of Programs for the Gifted. (2001) 2010–2011 *State of the states in gifted education*. Washington, D.C: Author

⁵ The other states in addition to Connecticut include Vermont, Rhode Island, Michigan and Idaho.

⁶ Plucker, Jonathan; Hardesty, Jack and Nathan Burroughs. "Excellence Gap State Reports." UConn Center for Educational Policy. 2012. Web
¹² February 2015.

⁷ Ibid.