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Testimony to the Joint Committee on Education Public Hearing

*SB 379: An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force; SB 380: An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the Mastery Examination From Teacher Evaluations; HB 5550: An Act Concerning Various Revisions and Additions to the Education Statutes; HB 5551: An Act Concerning the Commissioner's Network of Schools*

Monday, March 7, 2016

Good afternoon, Chairman Fleischmann, Chairwoman Slossberg and distinguished members of the Education Committee. My name is Jennifer Alexander, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN).

First, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to talk about the important policy proposals to help our students succeed in the classroom and in life. I also want to thank this committee for its hard work in helping our kids become some of the highest performers in the United States.

Since 2004, ConnCAN has been committed to our core mission: promoting student-centered policies that ensure all children have access to an excellent education, regardless of race, zip code or family income.

Our state cannot afford to lose momentum in ensuring teacher and leader quality in our classrooms. That's why I am here in opposition to **Senate Bill 380: An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the Mastery Examination from Teacher Evaluations**. This bill proposes to exclude student performance data on the Smarter Balanced Assessment from teacher performance evaluations.

Earlier today I joined a group of colleagues from across the state, including parents, community organizations, business organizations, school and district leaders, to express our strong opposition to this legislation, which we believe is premature and unnecessary. There is no need to legislate this matter when key stakeholder groups are actively working together on this issue.

Connecticut's Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC), which represents superintendents, boards of education, principals and teachers, was created for the express purpose of designing and implementing an educator evaluation system. This group unanimously agreed on the system it designed and it is important that we continue to allow the PEAC to continue its work to refine the system. This legislation would undermine the process that the legislature itself established to fully implement an evaluation system in our state. We need a fair and accurate teacher evaluation system in place in every school – one that will give teachers feedback to do their best work,

help schools recognize, support and retain their best teachers, and allow districts to remove teachers who do not improve even after receiving support.

We owe it to teachers and principals to keep their growth and professional development top of mind, because they deserve the opportunity to maximize their strengths and improve areas where they may struggle. And we owe it to students and parents to ensure that student achievement growth is part of the evaluation system.

In Connecticut, student achievement growth should be the most significant consideration of an educator's evaluation, in addition to other measures. This bill prematurely seeks to delink student achievement growth as part of the evaluation process – even before that link has been made and before any data has been collected to justify that exclusion.

Meanwhile, we don't have to look very far to find teacher evaluation success stories. New Haven provides a strong local example.

Since 2009, New Haven has maintained an effective evaluation system that includes student achievement results. This system--much like our statewide system--was developed in collaboration with the Board of Education, the administration, and representatives of teachers and school leaders. Results from New Haven are promising so far: 91 percent of the teachers who were rated "Needs Improvement" in 2011-2012, who stayed in the district, were rated "Effective" or better in 2013-2014.

Research has demonstrated other important examples from across the country that show teacher evaluations tied to multiple measures, including student achievement growth, dramatically improves the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

We believe a modern evaluation system will allow Connecticut to recognize our teachers and school leaders for a job well done, and provide intervention where it is needed. An effective evaluation system is key to an effective public education system. And an effective public education system is key to our state's economic future.

Not all students will choose to pursue continuing education when they graduate from high school. However, research shows that two-thirds of jobs by 2018 will require at least some form of post-secondary education. We know students who learn from effective teachers and leaders obtain more education and are better prepared for college, careers and life. That preparation has become even more important in an increasingly competitive global economy.

These are among the reasons we believe it is imperative to reject this bill and move forward with an evaluation system that is designed to support and develop our teachers and leaders while improving student achievement in our schools.

Next, I want to talk about **SB 379, An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force**. We support this bill and urge you to amend it to make more progress.

Our state can and must do better when it comes to placing teachers and leaders of color in our classrooms and schools. This is a critical issue because more than 40 percent of our students are of color, yet fewer than 10 percent of our teachers are of color. Rarely do students see teachers and principals who look like them, and this is not reflective of the society that most of us live in every day.

We know the positive effect role models have on our children and their academic performance. Simply put, studies show that when kids are exposed to more teachers who look more like them, it is a good thing. I urge you to take action, during this session, and find ways to increase the pipeline of great educators or color in our state.

We appreciate that this proposal includes the extension of the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force, which shows the General Assembly is committed to these efforts. However, I encourage you to do more, during the current legislative session, to increase the number of teacher and leaders of color in our schools. We know that the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force has been hard at work and we urge you to consider their recommendations. We also urge you to act on information that is clear. For example, you could amend this proposal to ensure full licensure reciprocity. Our current reciprocity policies wrongly place stumbling blocks in front great, certified teachers from other states. In addition, you can expand alternate routes to certification for teachers and ensure implementation of the alternate route for administrators that this Committee created but has not yet been carried out by the state. As Connecticut school districts seek to hire top talent, they are competing against other states with better licensure policies. To make our state competitive, I urge you to go farther, this session to recruit and retain high-quality teachers and leaders of color in Connecticut.

Finally, I would like to address **HB 5551, which makes revisions to the Commissioner's Network law, and HB 5550, which includes annual reporting requirements for the state's turnaround program**.

I believe the issue of educational equity, and closing our state's pervasive achievement gaps, is one of today's more pressing civil rights issues. I am passionate about this issue not only as an advocate, but also as a mom who has chosen to raise my children here.

When the Commissioner's Network was established in 2012, it marked an ambitious beginning, but the results so far have been mixed. Results from the release of the state's new next-generation school and district accountability system show that 40 schools are in the state's turnaround category, the lowest classification in the system. In fact, of the 136 schools identified as Focus or Turnaround, 50 had been classified over 3 and a half years ago as the lowest performing. A number of these schools have been

persistently underperforming for generations, and we need strong laws and policies in place to take the steps to turning around these schools.

When we look at research from across the country on states that are making progress on education--Massachusetts, Tennessee, Louisiana--all of these systemic efforts include a robust program to turn around their lowest-performing schools. Lawrence, Massachusetts has gone from one of the lowest performing districts in the state to one of the fastest improving districts statewide. At UP Academy Boston, once one of the lowest-performing schools in the city, ranked No. 1 in the state for four consecutive years for student growth in math on the state's performance test. In Tennessee, the average composite proficiency rate has seen double-digit growth since the presence of the Achievement School District (ASD). Priority schools in the bottom 5 percent are getting better, faster — four times the rate of non-Priority schools. In Louisiana, the percentage of students at or above basic achievement levels has nearly doubled from 28 percent to 53 percent between 2008 and 2015. Connecticut must do the same, and that is why we support HB 5550 and HB 5551. These bills propose changes to the law that would strengthen the state's approach.

Specifically, HB 5551 makes revisions to the Commissioner's Network law that can strengthen our turnaround programs to dramatically affect student achievement and growth, especially for our students most in need of support. This legislation would help provide school leaders and lead partners the tools, resources, autonomy and flexibility in areas including staffing, scheduling, budgeting, and programming to successfully implement high-level intervention and turnaround strategies.

Connecticut has appropriated \$45 million in state funding to the Network. We must couple this significant investment of resources with impactful changes to ensure improved results. We urge you to support House Bill 5551 and HB550. With the right policy, operating conditions, and school leaders and models in place, we can ensure bold, transformational improvements in schools and student outcomes.

Thank you.