

Date: February 16, 2016

Subject: Appropriations Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education Hearing Testimony  
H.B. No. 5044 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING  
JUNE 30, 2017.

Dear Senator Bye, Representative Gonzalez, Senator Slossberg and Representative Fleishmann, as well as all of the Elementary and Secondary Education Appropriations Committee;

My name is Jocelyn Ault and I am a Family and Community Engagement Specialist for CommPACT Community Schools Collaborative. This is one of the initiatives in turnaround school legislation. I am before you today to strongly oppose the elimination of funding for CommPACT (Governor's proposed budget line item T507). This is a program which moved last year from the Higher Education budget to the Elementary and Secondary budget.

We always bemoan, "Why don't our parents get more involved? Why is it always the parents who we don't need to see who show up but the ones whose kids are struggling, don't show up?" I challenge you to think of exactly what happened the last time you walked into a school as just a parent, or your neighbor told you about walking into a school. Rarely do we hear good stories but we abound with stories of being made to wait for long periods with no communications, being asked for photo id, being talked to with teacher-speak terms and having no clue what was said. Add to that a common urban story line where the parent was not a terribly successful student themselves harboring bad memories about being judged negatively by schools and teachers. Imagine instead of a welcoming school that actually capitalizes on the talents, skills and interests of parents and community members and engages them as partners in helping our students succeed.

CommPACT Community Schools Collaborative has been part of the State Department of Education turnaround school improvement model and part of the legislative agenda. CommPACT is Directed by Dr. Michele Femc-Bagwell of the Neag School of Education and a collaborative board of members from AFT-CT, CAPSS, CEA, CFSA, and UConn. CommPACT offers schools unique expertise in the part of the equation that supports impactful family and community engagement, typically our weak link. This is a critical part of building dual capacity. Support is research based and aligns directly with the work of Joyce Epstein, Karen Mapp and Anne Henderson, all pioneers and experts in family-community engagement to support student success.

You may want to do your own research and go to nontraditional sources who have no skin in the game to see the impact of family engagement. I suggest looking at Gallop polling information found at: [http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/186026/crucial-element-successful-schools-parent-engagement.aspx?utm\\_source=alert&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=morelink&utm\\_campaign=syndication](http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/186026/crucial-element-successful-schools-parent-engagement.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_content=morelink&utm_campaign=syndication)

We cannot expect that our classroom teachers can in seven, or even nine hours a day, for 180 or so days carry all the burden of remediating language barriers, trauma, learning disabilities, food insecurity, lack of sleep and all the other areas that impact the learning in their classroom. We have to create support systems through our families and caregivers. We need to capitalize on our community resources. These are often free resources that can be used to support and enrich learning. Our diverse communities are asset rich, but we don't identify or leverage them and so we lose out on the power they possess in turning students into ready and able learners.

This is where CommPACT (Community, Parents, Administrators, Children and Teachers) comes into play. It is by uniting the expertise of our stakeholders that we foster the kind of engagement in our children that leads to achievement. Some key results that you may want to know about in looking at the question of value and where to put your limited dollar resources:

- By engaging staff, students and families, Bassick High School in Bridgeport found dramatic improvement in freshman attendance and a great reduction in students who disengaged from learning. In just one semester, with CommPACT's support, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade saw 65% of the students worked with had at least a 30% improvement in attendance. Almost 50% of the students had a 50% or better improvement in attendance.
- At both Bassick High School in Bridgeport and West Side Middle School in Waterbury, where CommPACT has supported the development of an on-site family and community resource center, we have had over 3,000 visits by family, student, staff and community members who have been involved in a wide variety of programs which include parenting skills, revitalization of parent/teacher/student organizations, financial skills training, learning how to help our children learn, and learning to engage with staff in meaningful ways. This includes building trusting relationships. Over 600 hours of volunteer time has been capitalized on. Community organizations have been very giving of their time and talents.
- At Robert J. O'Brien, the staff, parents and students have envisioned what they want in the future. They have started to engage community partners and developed a parent-student-staff fitness program as just one example of taking tools and uniting to benefit all. One mom who came to the program for her son's sake is now a parent leader in the School Governance Council and is contributing many volunteer hours.

Parents want the best for their children. They want better communications. They want to be partners. CommPACT's ability to engage stakeholders, bring best practices into schools, and provide ground level support works. Success is contagious as we see the ripple effect as others, in each of our districts, start to engage more of their families and community. Family and community engagement are keys to not having to pump more and more money into schools and still not seeing the needle move.

Disparate educational outcomes are a social justice issue so large and consuming so much of our budget and resources that we can no longer keep doing what we have been doing. The structures must change. Capitalizing on our resources and understanding that our diversity is in fact a strength and is our pathway to educating all children in our state. Our economic base depends on being seen as a leader in education. As long as we leave the thousands of urban youth behind, we will instead be supporting entitlement programs and prisons. I want **my** tax dollars to go to building our community. We have the data, we need the fortitude now to bring all the stakeholders into the equation and make us all accountable.

Let's truly commit to family and community engagement as an agent of change and use the CommPACT Community Schools Collaborative model because it works and transforms activities to into results. To learn more about CommPACT Community Schools Collaborative, go to <http://compact.uconn.edu/>.

Thank you,

Jocelyn Ault  
434 Laughlin Rd., Stratford, CT 06614