

Public Testimony on the Committee on Education of the Connecticut General Assembly
Pursuant to HB.5551

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It is my understanding that the Committee on Education for the Connecticut General Assembly is being asked to consider a bill that proposes the expansion (and deregulated operation) of the Commissioner's Network, established to promote the turnaround of "low-performing schools" in the State of Connecticut. The General Assembly conceived of the Commissioner's Network as a partnership between the State and the local educational district: the State would provide additional resources and managerial leadership whereas the local district would supply the human creativity and energy needed to put the turnaround plan into effect. It was assumed by those who crafted the legislation that "local knowledge" was an invaluable factor in designing appropriate turnaround models, as officers at the State Department of Education could not be expected to have the same degree of familiarity with the problems on the ground as the local educators and parents and other key agents in the local community. It was clear that the legislature intended to preserve the ethos of community participation in local education democracy, even as the local education board conceded sovereignty to the State in managing the turnaround schools in question. However, it might well be asked if the legislative intent to *preserve* democracy actually achieved that result when the law regarding the Commissioner's Network went into effect.

I had the privilege to serve on the turnaround committee that devised a plan for Windham Middle School, as the school was brought into the Commissioner's Network. As I'm sure you are aware, Windham is an economically distressed community, with powerful needs in bilingual programming and in Special Education. Like other urban communities in the State of Connecticut, Windham has a range of social and economic problems that impacts the systemic delivery of: unemployment and underemployment are by no means negligible; home foreclosures are not uncommon; and the local tax base is woefully inadequate to provide for schools at the appropriate level. I don't mean to provide here a sociology or economics lesson, I am only trying to paint you a portrait of the truly difficult circumstances in which Windham schools are obliged to operate, and the real challenges these pose to school turnarounds.

The Windham Middle School turnaround Committee made a good faith effort to come up with a plan that best served our children, while also meeting the formal requirements of the Commissioner's Network. But the process was protracted and stressful to all concerned, because powerful figures at the State Department of Education (including the Commissioner) disavowed the recommendations of the Committee and tried to steer the turnaround plan in directions they preferred. This rejection of democracy could have been justified had we devised a plan that was entirely hopeless, with no chance of success; but such was not the case. Our plan had precedent in other turnaround models, and it seemed to us most appropriate to Windham's specific needs. There was no evidence to be had to prove its likely ineffectiveness.

It soon became clear that the State Department of Education was resistant to our turnaround plan on purely *ideological* grounds, because our plan made no room for privatizing initiatives of any sort. As a committee, we were convinced that a Charter School Management Company or any such player in the new educational market would not have the expertise, the long-term commitment or the social vision to aid in turning around the local Middle School. There is a weighty and still growing body of evidence that Charter Schools do no better—and often worse—than local education districts in improving student achievement at “low performing schools.” But the question is larger than just student achievement: Charter School Management Companies, as private entities, have a devastating and demoralizing effect on local democracy. Indeed, the establishment of a charter school in place of a public institution has the real practical effect of diminishing the rights of parents to be involved in their children’s education; it curtails the parents’ standing as “citizens” and leaves them only as “consumers” or “stakeholders,” at best. Once the market takes over from community, as the guardian of education, in too many instances it becomes a matter of “buyer beware.” The scandals in Connecticut and all over the nation regarding the financial, ethical and pedagogical practices of Charter School Management Companies are too common to be lightly dismissed. It’s revealing that the Windham Middle School turnaround Committee was invited (by State officials) to consider a “lead partner” turnaround plan with Jumoke-FUSE, presided over by the disgraced Michael Sharpe. The children in Windham have significant and urgent needs, and playing roulette with their education—that is, gambling on finding competent and trustworthy charter school operators—is not a reasonable or moral course of action

Now comes ConnCAN, the major sponsor of HB 5551, asking for more deregulation and for more schools to be included in the Commissioner’s Network. It’s clear that giving the State Department of Education more power to grant waivers on budgeting, staffing, programming and so on is not only a recipe for allowing in all sorts of bad possibilities, it also represents an assault on the local control of schools, as the State (not being bound by certain statutory mandates) could, in essence, allow things to be done at Commissioner’s Network Schools that most parents would profoundly disagree with, and yet the parents would have no form of redress. At this point, Connecticut would *de facto* have two educational systems: one in which parents were active participants with a voice, the other in which parents would be voiceless and could be actively ignored. It does not help matters that many of the schools in the Commissioner’s Network are overwhelmingly populated by ethnic and racial minorities. The perception and reality of “separate and unequal” schools would be hard to disavow. ConnCAN and other charter schools advocates wish to empower the State to undertake “high level interventions” in the name of “bold changes” and dramatic positive effects. But in truth the State of Connecticut already has considerable sovereign powers in the field of education. Giving more power to the State (by leave of the Commissioner’s Network) would be tantamount to the complete disenfranchisement of local communities. In other words, it would be profound and unwarranted assault on democracy.

No one doubts that the education system in Connecticut is in need of certain reforms, but school privatization (with the beneficiaries as Charter School Management Companies of dubious competence) does not exhaust all reform measures. For example, it's clear that the funding structure in Connecticut is unjust and unsustainable and one can easily see that a more efficient educational system would involve more school regionalization, as well as other initiatives.

Horace Mann, the great American educator who played such a vital role in helping to establish common schools, once said: "I believe in the existence of a great, immutable principle...the absolute right of every human being that comes into the world to an education; and which, of course, proves the correlative duty of every government to see that the means of that education are provided for all." It is my sincere conviction that the expansion and deregulation of the Commissioner's Network (called for by ConnCAN) will not meet the standard outlined by Horace Mann. And for this reason I urge you to reject the passage of the proposed bill.

Thank you.