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Education Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 3100
Hartford, CT 06106

Ladies & Gentlemen;

My name is Richard F. Wareing and I am resident of the City of Hartford. I write with respect to H.B. 551 AN ACT CONCERNING THE COMMISSIONER'S NETWORK OF SCHOOLS. While the Commissioner's Network was created with the best of intentions, it has not well-served our children. While H.B. 551 has some good aspects, it is not the vehicle to reform the Commissioner's network. Indeed, radical changes to the structure of the Commissioner's Network are needed. Thus, just as I cannot support the Commissioner's Network as presently constructed, I cannot support this bill.

For the last four (4) years I have served on the Hartford Board of Education and have been the Chairman for the last two (2). I was also personally involved with the Commissioner's Network process at the John C. Clark, Jr. School and the Thurman L. Milner School in Hartford. Participation in those processes have made clear to me that there are structural flaws in the Commissioner's Network and also that there is a lack of turnaround experience and capacity at the Department level. These are deficits that seriously compromise any attempt to implement and oversee a turnaround effort. Indeed, absent major changes to the Commissioner's Network, it will continue to fail the highest-need and most-deserving children in our State.

As presently conceived, the Commissioner's Network has an insupportable theoretical premise; *i.e.* a turnaround committee comprised well-intentioned people, most (if not all) of whom have no prior knowledge of or experience with one of the lowest performing schools

in the State will, in a matter of weeks, develop a transformational plan to which every member of the turnaround committee agrees and which will be implemented in a period of weeks and then transform in three (3) years or less a school which has struggled for years, and in some cases decades. At best, this premise, and the assumptions which support it, is hopelessly naïve. This structure twice failed in Hartford and I cannot see how it can succeed anywhere.

First, the unanimity requirement (which to its credit H.B.551 does address) eliminates any real hope for a transformational turnaround plan. Schools in the Commissioner's Network have serious and deep-rooted problems, some (if not all) of which require remedial measures that will be hard, incredibility unpopular, and even divisive. The present structure is an invitation for proverbial hostage-taking and allows any one person to shipwreck the entire process. As a result, the turnaround committee will likely either be unable to reach unanimity, or will compromise around a tepid plan designed to satisfy the members of the committee (and the constituencies they represent), not fundamentally transform a school.

But, while I appreciate H.B. 551's attempt to eliminate the unanimity requirement, I do not believe a turnaround plan admitted by a bare majority of the committee can succeed. Turning around a struggling school requires a broad base of support across multiple constituencies. This is so precisely because there is so much difficult work involved and also because much of what must be done will be unpopular and/or involve the proverbial goading of various oxen. A plan supported by a bare majority is unlikely to be able to survive the strain of its implementation.

Based on my experience, I recommend that a plan must enjoy the support of a 2/3 or 3/4 majority on the turnaround committee. This will provide the plan with a broad base of support but prevent individual members of the turnaround committee from taking the process hostage.

Second, the three-year turnaround track will always prove insufficient. As a preliminary matter, most schools eligible for the Commissioner's Network suffer from serious problems of school culture and climate. Thus, before the quality of teaching and learning can be improved, it is usually necessary to first establish a positive school culture and climate that

supports learning and the changes in practice that will be needed to improve the quality of teaching and learning. My experience is that efforts to establish a positive school culture and climate require at least one full school year, if not two.

Then there is the turnaround work itself. There are some quick wins that can be achieved in terms of raising student performance, but fundamental changes in school and student performance can come only from fundamental changes in standards and practices and it takes years, not months, to drive and cement such changes. There are a variety of reasons why this is true; *e.g.* a culture of low expectations and even failure must be expunged and new culture of high expectations and success established; the right school leader has to be found and that person must be given time to work; higher standards of professional practice must be developed and implemented; changes in faculty and staff will be needed but will not be easily effectuated, families and the broader school community have to become more engaged; and strong foundations of skill and knowledge have to be built in younger students, while serious remedial work is often necessary with older students.

Moreover, all of this work must be done against a backdrop of high turnover. My experience in Hartford is that turnaround schools typically have very high faculty and staff turnover and they also have a very transient student body. Imagine trying to coach a team whose players change before every game and you are imagining the work of a turnaround principal.

While H.B. 551 allows a school to remain in the Commissioner's Network more than three (3) years, a longer period should be required. Based on my experience in Hartford, as well as my experience with schools that are eligible for the Commissioner's Network but which have not been selected, I recommend a five (5) year track, with the ability to extend it on a year-by-year basis as needed.

If we are serious about improving the lowest performing schools we must commit to going the whole way, not packing up the helicopters at some pre-determined time and flying out to the aircraft carrier so we can unfurl the "Mission Accomplished" banner, even though the war still rages on behind us.

A third structural flaw in the Commissioner's Network is the composition of the turnaround committee. As presently constructed the turnaround committee may have only one member

– a parent – with any connection to or experience with the school. H.B. 551 eliminates even that meagre requirement. There is no doubt that outside perspective and expertise is needed in these situations, but so is local knowledge. Every school and school community is unique and without an understanding of what makes a school unique it is not possible to devise a plan to improve it.

Hartford’s Superintendent, Dr. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, like to say “to serve you well, I need to know you well.” That statement applies in this context. To serve a turnaround school well, the turnaround committee must know that school and its community well.

Indeed, while Hartford’s schools may appear to outsiders to be the same, or at least very similar, they are not. The so-called “black and brown” whom we serve in Hartford are hardly monolithic. A Latino student of Puerto Rican descent, born in Hartford is likely to have very different needs than a Latino student recently arrived from San Juan, who is likely to have very different needs than a Latino student recently arrived from Santo Domingo, who is likely to have very different needs than a Latino student recently arrived from a small village in rural Peru. Yet, on paper, all of these students are “Latino” or “Hispanic” and quite possibly all of them would be classed as “English Language Learners.”

Similarly, every school has its own history and institutions, every school is likely to have its own relationship and reputation with the community it serves, and every school is likely to serve a somewhat different role in that community. Moreover, every school has its particular strengths and weaknesses and every school certainly has a faculty with different levels of experience, skill, and morale. Without an understanding of the actual conditions on the ground, it is impossible to devise a plan that has a reasonable prospect of success.

This work cannot be done in the air-conditioned offices of the State Department of Education, or of the Hartford Board of Education, for that matter. It has to be done in the trenches, on the front lines, in a hard, messy struggle, working with real people.

Thus, my recommendation is that the turnaround committee contain at least one parent, an educator, and an administrator of the school in question, as well as other individuals who provide an “outsider” perspective, as well as the experience and technical expertise in turnarounds that a school in the Commissioner’s Network typically lacks.

Fourth, neither H.B. 551 nor the Commissioner’s Network as it presently exists, creates an adequate planning and implementation process. Rather, both contemplate the development of a transformational plan in a matter of weeks, with not much more time than that to begin its implementation at the start of the next school year. Frankly, this might be the biggest weakness of the Commissioner’s Network structure and one that probably dooms to failure all efforts carried out thereunder.

I acknowledge urgency is needed. Indeed, it is nearly paramount. But urgency without purpose is wasted energy and a rushed plan and slapdash implementation of a rushed plan in the name of urgency serves only our consciences, not our children.

Frankly, the failure of the Commissioner’s Network at Milner and at Clark can be laid, in large part, at the feet of inadequate planning and implementation process that exists in the Commissioner’s Network as currently constituted. Decisions that should have taken weeks was made in days. Groundwork that should have been laid over the course of months was put down in weeks. In retrospect, it is hard to see how either of those plans could have been successful. .

I would recommend a two-tiered planning and implementation process. Phase one could be undertaken in a matter of months and would consist of identifying and beginning to address the culture and climate issues that are barriers to learning, as well as identifying and beginning to address some basic shortcomings in the teaching and learning process that almost certainly exist. Doing so will help children in the here and now, lay the groundwork for future efforts, and build morale and confidence among students, faculty, administrators, and staff, and service as a demonstrable gesture to the school community that change is actually coming.

While phase one is underway, a more intensive planning and implementation process would be undertaken in which a school-specific turnaround plan is developed. One of my grandmothers liked to say “measure twice, cut once.” That advice would be well-taken in this context.

Moreover, a longer gestation period also increases the window for obtaining community buy-in. Frankly, the school communities of schools in the Commissioner’s Network tend to be

distrusting, even suspicious, and are very often cynical and even jaded. But who can blame them? They have been promised many things by many people and few, if any, of those promises have ever been kept. A longer process allows for more time to work with the school community to build support, address concerns, and demonstrate a seriousness of purpose and level of commitment needed to win real community support.

And make no mistake, such support is essential. Absent stakeholder buy-in, no turnaround plan, however well-conceived, can succeed. We need the active support of our parents, our pastors, and our community activists and leaders. There is just too much work to do for us to rely on the faculty, administration, and staff of a single school, supported by a few people from the State Department of Education and the local board of education.

Finally, neither the Commissioner's Network as presently constructed, nor H.B. 551, addresses the single most important variable in school performance, and thus the single most important variable in school turnarounds; *i.e.* human capital. The Hartford Board of Education has nearly 3,000 employees and I know of only three (3) who as principals successfully led the turnaround efforts at a neighborhood school. There may be others, but expertise and successful experience in turnarounds is hard to come by and I don't think Hartford is unique. My experience with the State Department of Education during the Milner and Clark turnarounds was that its employees were well-meaning and intelligent, but woefully underequipped in terms of knowledge and experience in school turnarounds.

In fact, it was the lack of in-house knowledge that led to the decision to hire Jumoke/FUSE as the turnaround lead agent at Milner. But, even apart from the ethical and legal issues that arose, there was a clear lack of capacity. Running a successful charter school is fundamentally different than turning around a neighborhood school.

Indeed, the capacity issue manifested itself again at Clark when CREC was selected as the lead turnaround agent. CREC has some very capable employees and runs some fine magnet schools. But, building and running successful magnet schools is also fundamentally different than turning around a neighborhood school, as the CREC employees involved began to see literally within days after the start of classes.

If the Commissioner's Network is going to succeed there needs to be within the State Department of Education, as there is in the Massachusetts Department of Education, a specific capacity – a turnaround office – consisting of professionals with experience in school turnarounds who can evaluate and monitor local efforts and help shape better plans. Many educators have told me that turnaround work is the hardest work they have ever done. I believe that. If we are to succeed in this work, we must assemble and make available to local school districts the necessary expertise. This is far more important than one-time infusions of resources in the form of temporary up-staffing or additional technology and/or educational materials.

In addition, we must build capacity at the local level. To its credit, H.B. 551 tries to do that by creating incentives for great teachers to teach at schools in the Commissioner's Network, but it will take a lot more than a handful of great teachers. Indeed, Hartford's last two teachers of the year both teach at lower performing school. Their work is awesome, but two teachers aren't enough. Twenty teachers won't be enough. Two hundred would be a good start, at least for Hartford.

Frankly, we must also find a way to attract to our lowest performing schools our very best principals. A great principal is – in a military parlance – a force multiplier. He/she increases the effectiveness and efficiency of others working in the school. He/she also drives a better school culture and higher standards of practice and he/she likewise demands better results and manages his/her people to those standards in order to get those results. I know of three neighborhood schools in Hartford that are showing real progress and real promise. Each one is led by an outstanding principal and their leadership is what driving progress is.

We must also build the capacity of the hundreds of rank-and-file employees who work at schools eligible for the Commissioner's Network. They may not be superstars, but if well-trained, well-motivated and well-led they can accomplish great things.

Finally, we must also increase the cultural competency of our people. Urban life, urban people, and urban schools are fundamentally different than their suburban, exurban, and rural counterparts. Issues of race, ethnicity, language, and class create challenges most schools and most schoolchildren in America never face. One way to meet these challenges is to

provide more training, education, and professional development for all educators around this issue. Frankly, these issues are underappreciated and they are also often difficult to confront. Until we do, however we cannot move our lowest performing schools forward.

Another way to do this is to recruit and develop more teachers from urban environments. Taking action on H.B. 379 AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MINORITY TEACHER RECRUITMENT TASK FORCE would be a good start. In Hartford, our native teachers and administrators, and our teachers and administrators from other urban centers provide by virtue of who they are and their own lives knowledge, perspective, and credibility which would take years if not decades to develop and which is essential to gaining the trust of and working effectively with the students, families, and communities touched by the Commissioner's Network.

Such educators are also an invaluable source of inspiration to our students. One day, I had the chance to tour Hartford Public High School. With me, was Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, one of our Assistant Superintendents and a graduate of Hartford Public. During a conversation with a student, Dr. Torres-Rodriguez told the young lady she was a graduate of Hartford Public. Dismayed, the student responded "no way, nobody who goes to this school could have your job." That was a heartbreaking and enraging moment, but Dr. Torres-Rodriguez didn't give up. Eventually she convinced the young lady she was, indeed, a graduate of Hartford Public. Perhaps she also planted a seed in the young lady that she, like Leslie, could graduate from Hartford Public and go on to achieve great things.

I acknowledge that what all of what I have just described is a long and complicated process. It will take years of work and certainly cannot be accomplished in an election cycle or two. But, there are no easy answers, only hard truths and hard work. I applaud the Committee for taking up H.B. 551 and while I do not support it, I do support the debate it has triggered and am hopeful that it will lead to a better education for the thousands of underserved urban students in Connecticut. Thank you.

Respectfully,

Richard F. Wareing