

CCER
Connecticut Council
for
EDUCATION REFORM

Testimony by Jeffrey Villar, Ph.D. to the Education Committee

March 7, 2016

Good morning, distinguished members of the Education Committee. My name is Jeffrey Villar, and I am the Executive Director of CCER. On behalf of the organization, I would like to voice my opposition to S.B. 380, *An Act Concerning the Exclusion of Student Performance Results on the Mastery Examination from Teacher Evaluations*.

Since CCER's inception, we have supported measures to improve educational outcomes for all students. We believe that the idea of decoupling student performance on statewide mastery exams from teacher evaluations ignores the impact of teachers on student learning. Research has demonstrated that a low-performing student who is consistently exposed to high-quality teachers can see significant academic progress, while a student with just one ineffective teacher may fall behind and stay behind academically. That's why it is so important for us to have a balanced evaluation system that incorporates both subjective and objective measures, that is fair to both teachers and students, that holds teachers accountable, and that helps them to develop professionally. Equally important is to ensure that we use standardized measures to capture the impact of a teacher's performance upon student learning. The Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC) will, for the first time next year, provide Connecticut with a statistically accurate measure of student growth on each of the content areas assessed. It is essential that we continue to incorporate these data into our balanced formula for evaluating our educators.

I also respectfully remind you that it is not too long ago that the General Assembly established the Performance Evaluation Advisory Committee (PEAC) to manage the complex process of monitoring Connecticut's teacher evaluation system. I urge you to leave this process in the capable hands of PEAC. I also urge you to resist any suggestions to change the processes or procedures that PEAC is expected to follow. The membership of PEAC is representative of the many important stakeholders in the evaluation process, and, to date, has demonstrated that it is able to effectively collaborate and manage the process of teacher evaluation.

In addition to voicing strong opposition to S.B. 380, I would like to applaud efforts to improve minority recruitment, as described in S.B. 379, *An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force*. However, I would also urge any committee dedicated to teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention to additionally consider: (1) the feasibility of using performance assessments as a measure of teacher candidates' ability to produce lesson plans, teach, and evaluate students; (2) whether certification requirements for particular endorsements (such as those in science) contain unnecessary bureaucratic barriers that impede our ability to staff schools properly; and (3) whether the state would benefit from access to meaningful, publicly reported and aggregated data on teacher evaluations so that we can be aware of which preparation programs are best helping to serve students' needs.

I would also like to voice my support for H.B. 5551, *An Act Concerning the Commissioner's Network of Schools*, which seeks to improve our existing framework for intervening in some of Connecticut's chronically low-performing schools. Although our access to data on the effectiveness of the Commissioner's Network has, frankly, been limited—the general consensus is that there is room for improvement. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, this bill seeks to address some of the challenges faced by schools within the Commissioner's Network through a variety of strategies, including: (1) using measurable standards and indicators to annually evaluate each school in the Network on whether it is making progress, so that we can make changes if it isn't; (2) giving the Commissioner greater authority over her Network so that she can continue efforts that are working and change efforts that aren't; (3) creating a standard block of waivers for schools within the Network so that they can gain sufficient autonomy and flexibility to begin to address deep-rooted dysfunctions; and (4) changing the composition of turnaround committees—which are currently imbalanced—so that they better reflect community interests.

These strike me as meaningful and reasonable changes if you are truly trying to address chronic underperformance. When significant systemic changes need to be addressed, it only makes sense that greater levels of accountability should be exchanged for greater levels of autonomy. Unless we grant real flexibility to the Commissioner's Network, it will be very difficult for these schools to enact real and meaningful change.

Lastly, I want to voice my strong opposition to H.B. 5555, *An Act Concerning the Minimum Budget Requirement and Prohibiting the Inclusion of Participation Rates for the State-Wide Mastery Examination in the Calculation of a School District's Accountability Index Score*. My concern is about a provision that seeks to remove participation rates from a school district's accountability index score. I have been an educator for decades, and I can remember the many creative steps that schools and districts took to improve their performance on standardized measures. (Some such measures were as extreme as suggesting to struggling students that they should stay home on the day of the test.) The 95% participation rate provision is essential to ensuring that our schools are meeting the needs of all students.

Borrowing from the language of the National Parent Teacher Association: "Nonparticipation can result in a loss of funding, diminished resources and meaningful interventions for student subgroups, which would have a disparate impact on minorities and students with special needs and widen the achievement gap. Opting out also stalls innovation by inhibiting effective monitoring and improvement of programs, instructional strategies and exams, and could thwart transparency by providing incomplete data sets for states and schools."

The change to the Minimum Budget Requirement that was made last year is essentially an acknowledgment that when a school or district is more accountable for its outcomes, it should also receive more autonomy. If a district can prove that it is serving its students well, then we can allow it to determine how best to manage its own funds. However, if we were to ignore participation rates on standardized assessments, we would lose the capacity to access comparable and reliable data as to whether a district is actually serving its students well. It doesn't mean anything if you show great results based upon only a small subset of your student population. If we want to provide Connecticut's students with an exceptional education, we need to take steps to hold ourselves more accountable, not less.

Endnotes.