



Testimony of
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AFT Connecticut, AFL-CIO

Education Committee Hearing
March 16, 2017

HB-7251 AN ACT CONCERNING REFORM DISTRICT TURNAROUND PLANS.

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Sanchez, Senator Bye, Senator Somers and members of the Education Committee. My name is Patti Fusco. I am a teacher in West Haven public schools and I am the Divisional Vice President of AFT Connecticut, a diverse state federation of more than 90 local unions representing nearly 30,000 public and private sector employees. Our members include more than 15,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, school nurses and other school personnel across the state. It is on their behalf that I appear before you to testify today, as well as the behalf of the state's students, who are not able to advocate for themselves.

I am speaking in favor of some portions of House Bill 7251, which defines how districts who are defined as "reform" districts shall draw up and execute their turnaround plans. I think it is a good idea to have districts receive help in drawing up plans from the State Department of Education and the State Board of Education, in particular, requiring an operations audit to identify possible programmatic savings and an instructional audit to identify any deficits in curriculum and instruction or in the learning environment of the school or district. Having outsiders and experts make suggestions is always a good idea. I also think it is a good plan to require the local or regional board of education for these schools or districts to use state and federal funds for critical needs, as directed by the State Board of Education. This will hopefully help ensure that the extra funding is used as it should be, to improve instruction. Assigning a technical assistance team to the school or district to guide school or district initiatives and report progress to the Commissioner of Education will be beneficial, provide they serve as guidance only, and cannot force districts or schools to implement changes that the elected Board of Education of that district agrees with their recommendations. Instructional and learning environment benchmarks for the school or district should be established to help the school or district to progress toward removal from the list of low achieving schools or districts. Students in these reform schools should have the right to attend other schools and therefore the state should provide funding to any proximate district of a district designated as a low achieving school district so that students in that low achieving district may attend public school in a neighboring district, provided that school has made adequate yearly progress on the benchmarks that the Connecticut State Department of Education sets.

I have serious misgivings about some of the other portions of the bill, even though they are not new. In particular having the Commissioner of Education appoint the superintendent of that district and/or a District Improvement Officer does not seem like a good idea to me. I believe that takes away local control from the Boards of Education who were elected to make the decisions regarding education in districts. Also, as I have pointed out in previous testimony, each district has its own culture and "political" structure. Bringing in an outsider, who does not understand how that district operates will not help the district but further harm it. You have to

have buy in from the staff in order to be effective. An outside improvement officer will cost money, usually a lot of money. Where will the districts find that money? It is likely to be taken directly from student services, since there is no fat left in district budgets with all the cuts that have been made and are proposed.

Furthermore, such improvement officers have not had much success in the past as evidenced in Hartford and in Windham, who both were put under review and still struggle despite the Improvement Officers that were put into place in the past.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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