



Testimony by Jeffrey Villar, Ph.D. to the Education Committee
March 16, 2017

Good morning, distinguished members of the Education Committee. My name is Jeffrey Villar, and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Council for Education Reform (CCER). On behalf of the organization, I would like to offer support for HB 7251—in large part because it emphasizes the need for role differentiation and effective leadership at the local level.

Just last week, we released the [findings of a study](#) that examined the efficacy of the Alliance District program since its inception. The study, commissioned by us and conducted by the Neag School of Education at UConn, essentially found that:

- (1) The state's regular changes to the scope and requirements of the Alliance District program likely reduced impact; and
- (2) Participating districts need increased professional development on effective strategic planning practices.

The study—which contains much more nuance than I am including for the purposes of this testimony—also had many implications for how state-led turnaround can be improved in Connecticut. One important take-away, based on the two over-arching findings, is the importance of strong stable leadership—both at the state and local levels. Leadership is an essential component of any successful school improvement effort.

We know this practically, having witnessed considerable disarray among several of our urban districts in recent years, often the result of entrenched interests and political disorder. I believe the role differentiation and training, as described in this bill, is an important step in reducing future turmoil. As a former school superintendent, I have worked under dysfunctional boards, and I have worked under highly functional boards. In the former circumstance, personal gripes and shortsightedness completely stalled efforts to improve learning for students. In the latter, the board becomes a tremendous resource, source of support and guidance, and asset. The responsibility to provide all children with a quality education lies with the state. This bill takes necessary steps in the right direction by improving district governance.

Another important implication of our recent report was the significance of developing a long-term coherence among district improvement efforts. Whether at the state- or local-level, the results aren't as good when you regularly shuffle through laundry lists of intervention ideas, or continually change leadership strategies. Instead, as demonstrated by presentations made by Bloomfield and Bristol at a recent Education Committee Forum, when leaders are able to implement a focused set of inter-related, aligned concepts over a long period of time, we see improvement.

To that end, turnover can be a serious impediment. That's why I see great merit in this bill's addition of succession planning as a strategy included in Alliance District improvement planning.

In general, [our study](#) seeks to embolden state-led turnaround, asking Connecticut to be steadfast in its efforts, to demand consistency and long-term focus, and to give district leaders the tools they need to succeed. HB 7251 strikes me as a bill that begins to address these needs.

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