



## TESTIMONY BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Amy Dowell, Connecticut State Director

Education Reform Now Connecticut

March 17, 2021

### Re: **Support for H.B. 6620, An Act Concerning the Right to Read and Addressing Opportunity Gaps and Equity in Public Schools**

Co-Chairs McCrory and Sanchez, Vice Chairs Barry and Daughterty Abrams, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and Members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide **testimony in support of H.B. 6620**. My name is Amy Dowell, and I'm here representing Education Reform Now CT (ERN CT), part of the *Right to Read CT* coalition, which includes literacy experts and advocacy groups pursuing equity in education.

We have worked closely on this bill with Senator Miller, but it also reflects years of prior leadership from her and others—including hard work, advocacy, and academic expertise on the part of many key members of the General Assembly's Black and Puerto Rican Caucus. It meets this very important moment for Connecticut students and educators in three critical ways:

- 1) It addresses the academic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 2) It addresses the bigotry of low-expectations reflected in ongoing opportunity gaps by race;
- 3) It addresses the moral and economic imperative to prepare all Connecticut students for college and career.

The pandemic has laid bare inequities in every corner of society. Of all the fabric in the social safety net, no part has been stressed more than education. Right now, parents, educators, and advocates are facing the monumental challenge of helping students to overcome learning losses. This will require a strong foundation in literacy. While the first few years of school are spent learning to read, after third grade, students must “read to learn.” Yet, even though we know how critical literacy skills are, Connecticut has failed to meet students' literacy needs. **Before the pandemic set students further behind, nearly half of the state's third grade public school students fell short of reading expectations, and outcomes were significantly lower for students of color.** As a state, we need to invest in the tangible, proven foundational skills that will give students firm footing when they return to school full-time. Now is the time to prioritize literacy so that we can cope with the academic consequences of COVID-19.

H.B. 6620 was also developed to address gaps in educational opportunity, which are both longstanding and widening in the wake of the pandemic. As challenging as literacy is for students across the state, data show that traditionally underserved student populations are especially vulnerable to Connecticut's ongoing literacy crisis. On the most recent administration of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2019, there was a difference of 32.8 percentage points between the percent of white and Hispanic 4th graders meeting proficiency levels in reading. Between white and Black 4th graders, the difference was 35.9 percentage points. **These outcomes are devastating, and reflect the longstanding history in our state and country of racially**

**segregating public schools and under-investing in public education in low-income urban and rural communities.** Like all students in Connecticut, students of color deserve a strong foundation in literacy that is steeped in educational and cognitive research.

Notably, embracing the science of reading would not only address racial inequities, but it would also give educators the tools to target a variety of needs along the continuum of literacy support and intervention. The skill of reading is associated with the significant and growing majority of special education identification in the state, but the training needed for dyslexia intervention, which is based on the science of reading, would actually help all students. Likewise for the instructional techniques needed to intervene with English Learners, who are often misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities related to reading. In other words, using the science of reading would drastically improve outcomes for students of color, English Learners, and students with dyslexia—while simultaneously serving all other students. Now is the time to prioritize literacy so that we can start to overcome these opportunity gaps.

Lastly, H.B. 6620 would address Connecticut's ongoing need to increase students' readiness for college and career. In 2019, ERN CT released a report titled "[Less for More: Low Rates of Completion and High Costs at Connecticut's Four-Year Colleges](#)," which identified, among other findings, that too many programs of higher education in Connecticut have low rates of graduation. A 2018 [report by P20-WIN](#) also found that nearly half of all students who enrolled in one of Connecticut's State Universities took a remedial course within the first two years of enrollment. **Students who do not learn basic reading skills struggle to complete the college curriculum that involves critical thinking and strong writing skills.** Now is the time to prioritize literacy so that we can prepare students to be academically and economically successful after high school.

The COVID-19 crisis and the Connecticut literacy crisis are converging at this moment, giving us the chance to do something lasting for Connecticut students. If we establish this statewide strategy, it will position us to overcome the enormous toll that the pandemic has taken on Connecticut children, close opportunity gaps, better prepare students, apply for federal funding, and reap long-term rewards. Please support H.B. 6620.



#### **About Education Reform Now CT**

The state chapter of a national organization, Education Reform Now CT is a 501(c)(3) that operates as a think tank and policy advocate, promoting great educational opportunities and achievement for all by increasing equity, protecting civil rights, and strengthening the social safety net.