

RESPONSE TO: [H.B. 6620](#), “AN ACT CONCERNING THE RIGHT TO READ AND ADDRESSING OPPORTUNITY GAPS AND EQUITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.”

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Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and distinguished members of the Education Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in strong support of **H.B. 6620, An Act Concerning the Right to Read and Addressing Opportunity Gaps and Equity in Public Schools.**

My name is Shannon Marimón, and I serve as executive director of ReadyCT, a 501c3 nonprofit dedicated to advancing academic excellence and career-connected learning for all public school students in Connecticut. ReadyCT was founded in 2011 for the purpose of closing what was then referred to as the achievement gap which, today, is represented more expansively as the opportunity gap (as referenced in this bill). A decade later, our organization continues to pursue that goal, and, as you will likely agree, the COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated the need to act now and act boldly.

ReadyCT strongly supports H.B. 6620, which aims to ensure that every Connecticut public school student receives early literacy instruction based on scientifically-proven, evidence-based curriculum and programs.

When only 41% of Connecticut’s fourth graders are hitting the proficient mark in reading¹, and when [research](#) clearly indicates *students learn to read and write far better with a curriculum that Connecticut is NOT universally using*, H.B. 6620 is long overdue and must be prioritized.

Those unfamiliar with education policy are often surprised to learn that Connecticut’s reading assessments indicate poor academic outcomes, mostly because there is often great fanfare and media coverage regarding the quality of public education in Connecticut. For example, [the same 2019 National Assessment for Education Progress report](#) that indicated only 41% of Connecticut’s fourth graders are hitting the proficient mark in reading also reported that Connecticut’s average fourth grade score (224) was lower than only two other states, and just weeks ago the College Board reported that Connecticut high school students lead the nation on advanced placement exam performance.²

The headlines and talking points that sing the praises of our state’s education system are in stark contrast to the reality, since *those headlines and talking points refer to outcomes for some and not all students*. The data highlights glaring inequalities. Again with reference to the 2019 NAEP report, fourth grade Black and Latinx students scored, on average, 33 points lower than White students. Regarding socio-economic status, low-income fourth grade students had an average score that was 35 points

¹ [National Assessment for Educational Progress \(NAEP\) report, 2019](#)

² [AP Cohort Data Report, Graduating Class of 2020](#)

lower than non-low-income students.³ Outcomes along racial and income lines improve only marginally for eighth grade students. In 2019, only 41% of Connecticut's eighth grade students scored at or above proficient in reading. Among eighth graders, Black students scored 29 points lower than White students, and Latinx students scored 26 points lower than White students. Low-income eighth graders scored 26 points lower than their non-low-income peers.⁴

Most fourth grade students are nine years old. Nine. The outcry in response to this -- including from this legislature -- should be loud, resounding, and actionable. They're just nine years old, and we're not giving them a chance.

Being illiterate dooms future prospects for any student. All fields of study -- whether it be information technology or robotics, math or foreign language, business or health sciences -- hinge on reading. It is well settled that a student must learn to read by Grade 3 so that s/he can then effectively read to learn. Illiteracy comes at a great cost not just to the individual but also to the broader community and the state in the form of lost economic contributions that might otherwise be made by a literate graduate. Consider Connecticut employers: this is a state where businesses continue to scramble to fill positions in high-growth/high-demand industries (e.g., advanced manufacturing, information technology, healthcare, and insurance/financial services). **A failure to act on the data so as to position public school graduates for success while providing employers access to a qualified workforce in ways that strengthen the state's overall economic health is unacceptable.**

We urge this legislature to support the establishment and sustainability of the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success in collaboration with the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). The CSDE has a history of promoting evidence-based literacy strategies -- most recently provided through the Connecticut K-3 Literacy Initiative (CK3LI) and now called the Connecticut Literacy Model; however, that effort hasn't gone far enough. Creating a Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success that is properly funded and staffed to best support districts for foundational, evidence-based literacy instruction and track accountability/outcomes is necessary to ensure all aims of H.B. 6620 are achieved -- including the provision of effective reading instruction in every classroom, addressing long standing educational inequities, and building a much-needed workforce for the state.

There are few things that are absolute certainties in education, but one of them is that there is a scientifically-proven way in which all students have the potential to learn how to decode words. If we want -- as we say we do -- to truly close the stubborn and pervasive opportunity gap in Connecticut, it would be pure negligence not to make this form of instruction available to each and every student within our public school system.

About ReadyCT

ReadyCT advocates for education policies and practices that narrow achievement and opportunity gaps so all Connecticut students can access and succeed within a 21st-century education system and beyond. We do this by collaborating with educators, employers, and community members across the state. We are guided by the belief

³ Low-income is defined as eligibility for the National School Lunch Program.

⁴ [National Assessment for Educational Progress, 2019 Report](#)

that schools must prepare all students to become thriving citizens and professionals, and we are committed to recruiting, preparing, and supporting educators to deliver on that promise. We consider how enacting one set of policies/actions makes realizing other policies/actions more possible and meaningful. Our priorities assume examples of positive growth and outcomes exist in some schools and districts, and that the state's role is to understand how certain schools and districts working with historically underserved students are closing gaps while others are not. We are attempting to study, learn from, optimize, and most importantly—scale—what's already been proven to have impact. Our recommendations focus on optimizing present resources rather than seeking new funding sources. ReadyCT undertakes strategic efforts that prepare every student to pursue whatever college, career, or credentialing opportunity they choose in order to reach their highest potential.