

Dear members of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission,

My name is Robert Cotto, Jr. and I come here as an independent scholar and individual member of the Hartford Board of Education. Thank you for providing the public with a forum to speak about the issue of bilingual education in Connecticut.

My grandparents are from Puerto Rico and Peru. I am bilingual and know Spanish and English. Getting a great opportunity in a public school to learn to read, write, and speak in both Spanish and English, I was in a better position to attend and graduate from Dartmouth College, Harvard University, and Trinity College. I have found in my experience at these places that the wealthiest families around the country are willing to pay handsomely for their children to learn new languages here and abroad, and world language classes are abundant in our suburban schools in Connecticut.

Children that know multiple languages and navigate various cultures will thrive in our increasingly diverse state and interconnected world. Pioneers in our state such as Maria Sanchez, who sat on the Hartford Board of Education and served on the Connecticut General Assembly recognized the tremendous assets of bilingualism that our Latino and Puerto Rican communities brought to Connecticut. She also understood that our culture and languages should be sustained along with instruction in English and a rich educational curriculum.

The evidence shows that well-designed and well-resourced bilingual education programs that build off of a child's first language to learn subject area content and English over time are more effective than "sink or swim," English-only programs.¹ However, the idea of bilingual education, like public education, is under siege. A recent PBS NewsHour story entitled, "Bilingual Classrooms Turn English-Only in Effort to Improve Test Scores," showed that towns and cities like New Britain are increasingly providing what amounts to English-only immersion instruction rather than bilingual education.² Although Connecticut's law provides families with the option of bilingual education, many families are either: not informed, not offered, or not aware that bilingual education is a legally protected option in schools with twenty or more students identified as "ELL."³ To understand these issues better, we need more concrete data on these trends from all schools and districts. However, we do know that at least two cities – Stamford and Hartford – have recently had to confront Federal investigations because of their lack of support with bilingual education programs for children identified as "ELL."⁴

It is also important to understand that emerging bilingual children across the state face multiple, related challenges.⁵ For example, both family income and language minority status are highly correlated to district rankings based on the state's standardized tests.⁶ Put another way, our children labeled as "ELL" are overwhelmingly attending schools that are concentrated in the districts with high needs all around, lack of resources, and demand for skilled educators.⁷ In 2010-2011, 78% of all children labeled "ELL" attended schools in the thirty school districts formerly called "priority" and now "alliance" districts.

As CT Voices for Children documented, there is little evidence that the current direction of education policy in Connecticut will better support children of color, particularly those identified as "English Language Learners."⁸ These policies, or "reforms," include the expansion of school choice programs (as currently designed), connecting teacher evaluations with standardized test results, "common core", conditional ECS funding of school districts, and stripping away of democratic control and public governance of local schools. At best, there is mixed evidence to support these ideas.⁹ At worst, past experience and more convincing evidence suggests that these policies will likely have a disproportionately negative impact on our low-income children of color, but particularly the Latino community and emerging bilingual children identified as "ELL."¹⁰

In 2012, I served on the Connecticut General Assembly's "English Language Learner Task Force" with a number of distinguished educators and policymakers. However, very few of the recommendations made by the committee ever made it into legislation. I humbly recommend that the Commissioners refer to the recommendations of the committee and take into account the information from the public hearing today.

For example, CT Voices for Children recommended that the task force:¹¹

- Provide English Language Learners a broader array of accommodations on standardized tests and other assessments such as the Connecticut Mastery Test, Connecticut Academic Performance Test, and any new assessments based on the Common Core State (national) Standards.¹²
- Encourage the study and development of best practices for ELL students, including new dual language programs in interdistrict magnet schools or integrated neighborhood schools.¹³
- Develop a strategy for the recruitment, retention, and support of English Language Learner students in magnet, charter, and technical schools.¹⁴
- Promote the training of local educators for English Learners Learners through tuition incentives and other "Grow your Own Teacher" programs for people in local communities towards certification and teaching in CT public schools.¹⁵
- Maintain an indicator on state and district databases of all students that were previously designated as English Language Learners

In addition to these recommendations, I would add:

- Replace conditional ECS funding of already under-resourced school districts that serve the vast majority of children identified as "ELL" with a progressive, adequately funded Education Cost Sharing Grant that accounts for the costs of providing bilingual education services.
- Report on the state's data tables (CEDaR) how many children receive a bilingual education program vs. other types of programs each year at each school in each district (hours, etc.) and how many bilingual education & ESL staff work at each school as well as their demographic and qualification information.
- Repeal the special master legislation, which has not yielded improvements in the conditions or opportunities in regular or bilingual education for children in New London and Windham.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Robert Cotto, Jr., Ed.M.

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¹ See Garcia, Eugene. "¡Ya basta! Challenging Restrictions on English-Language Learners." Chapter 19 in *Public Education Under Siege*, 194-200. Also see Gándara, Patricia. "Meeting the Needs of Language Minorities." Chapter 11 in *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, 156-168.

² *NewsHour*. "Bilingual Classrooms Turn English-Only in Effort to Improve Test Scores." Public Broadcasting Station, July 19, 2013. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily_videos/bilingual-classrooms-turn-english-only-in-effort-to-improve-test-scores/.

³ See Connecticut General Statute Sec. 10-17f. Duties of boards of education regarding bilingual education programs.

⁴ Varnon, Rob. "Stamford schools still working on agreement with Justice Dept." *The Stamford Advocate*. July 15, 2013. <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/local/article/Stamford-schools-still-working-on-agreement-with-4666339.php>. Also see de la Torre, Vanessa. "After Federal Probe, Hartford Schools Agree to Improve Services for 'English Language Learners.'" *The Hartford Courant*. March 22, 2013.

⁵ See Gándara 2013.

⁶ See "Correlation Coefficient Analysis." Connecticut General Assembly Education Cost Sharing Task Force. Prepared on 27 Nov. 2012, delivered at the meeting on 3 Jan. 2013 at the Legislative Office Building Room 1A. The comparison appeared to be between percent free and reduce priced meals in 2010-2011 and DPI from 2012, so these numbers did not correspond to the same year. However, the correlation coefficient was -0.933 between % FRPM eligible in 2010-11 and DPI in 2012. The correlation coefficient between district percent "ELL" and DPI was -0.76 in 2010-2011.

⁷ See Gándara 2013. In these 30 "alliance" districts, there were 23,664 out of all 30,344 children identified as "ELL" or 77.98% of all "ELL" children.

⁸ See Connecticut General Assembly. Education Committee. "*Testimony Regarding S.B. 24: An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness (District Management, Alternative Schools, and School-Based Health Centers)*." Hearing on S.B. 24, 2012 sess., February 22, 2012. http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/022212_education_sb24_distmgmt.pdf. Also see Connecticut General Assembly. Education Committee. "*Testimony Regarding S.B. 24: An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness (Teacher Evaluation Provisions)*." Hearing on S.B. 24, 2012 sess., February 21, 2012. http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/022112_education_sb24_teachereval.pdf.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ Connecticut Voices for Children. Task Force on English Language Learners. "*Recommendations to Task Force on English Language Learners*." April 5, 2012. <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/files/blog/edu12RecsELLTaskForce.pdf>.

¹² See Appendix A in CT Voices for Children Connecticut General Assembly ELL Task Force Testimony.

¹³ *Ibid*. Also see Hillman, Oppenheimer, and Velasquez. "English Language Learning Student In Connecticut." Connecticut Voices for Children. New Haven, CT; Jul. 2010. Web. <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/english-language-learning-students-connecticut>. Oppenheimer et. al. provide a summary of different programs for English Language Learners in the State of Connecticut, including dual-language programs.

¹⁴ See Appendix B and C of CT Voices for Children ELL Task Force Recommendations and Testimony.

¹⁵ *Ibid*. Also see Oppenheimer et. al. page 3 for a summary of the additional requirements for the certification of teachers of bilingual education courses. Also see *Grow Your Own Teacher Act* 110 ICLS 48. <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=2589&ChapterID=18>.