

Achievement Gap Task Force

MEETING MINUTES

Monday, July 20, 2012

10:00 AM in Room 2600 of the LOB

Attendees

Members: Dr. Miguel Cardona, Senator Toni Harp, Senator Andrea Stillman, Senator Mary Ann Handley, Representative Jason Rojas, Representative Marilyn Giuliano, Elaine Zimmerman, David Kennedy, Paul Freeman, Gary Highsmith, and Tom DeFranco,

Staff: Pooja Shah, Judy Lohman, John Moran

The meeting was called to order at 10:06 AM.

Co-chair Miguel Cardona and Co-chair Senator Toni Harp welcomed the members and asked the members if anyone had new recommendations that they would like to be discussed.

Representative Marilyn Giuliano stated we have the ability to be expansive and think outside the box. Schools can turnover at grade level, possibly grade one. She also said that there needs to be change in the paradigm and a new model of learning on language literacy and numeracy. She said that we should look at the kids as learning cohorts not just the classroom. There needs to be a change in the business of education.

Gary Highsmith, Hamden High School's principal said that the task force should focus on parents and families. He said the Reach out and Read Program, which work with young children to succeed in school by partnering with doctors to prescribe books and encourage families to read together. It teaches parents how to use books together with their children. He also suggested working closely with the Shaw Foundation.

Representative Marilyn Giuliano agreed that the Reach out and Read Program works with doctors and does an assessment with parents and their children. The outcome data is impressive. She suggested that we allocate public funds on home visitation to make sure that children are parents are engaged and place an emphasis on reading and learning from an early age.

Senator Toni Harp was concerned about just working with plans that already work. She wanted to make sure that the task force came up with fresh ideas instead of programs that are already in effect.

Mary Ann Handley stated that students need assistance. There should be a connection to post secondary remedial programs for students to get sufficient training.

At this point, Miguel Cardona asked John Moran from the Office of Legislative Research to explain what he had brought to the meeting. Mr. Moran said he used the compiled list of recommendations that everyone had in the last meeting and researched to see if there was an existing law or a partial law that supports it. Mr. Moran began going through the list and started with school breakfast. He said under existing law free breakfast should be covered if lunch is covered and that all schools are required to offer a total of 20 minutes of physical activity for grades K-5. Zimmerman stated that the school breakfast is lacking. Senator Andrea Stillman said that the New London superintendent has been very proactive about providing breakfast lunch and dinner for the past five years so nutritional requirements have been met. David Kennedy stated that hunger is a big issue in achievement gap. He noted that there are programs where students receive backpacks of food for the weekends. Mr. Highsmith wanted to make clear that you should focus on K-12 and not just first or second grade to make sure all students have a proper meal during and before school.

The second recommendation dealt with requiring laptops. Mr. Moran said there is no law on laptops but the state does offer corporate tax credit for computer donations. Senator Stillman wondered how many students know how to use a computer as a learning tool. She wants to make sure that children are encouraged to use it for educational purposes and that there are other ways to learn. She also notes that many families cannot afford their own computer so the donation would be greatly appreciated. Senator Harp said there is a program with the State Library that uses old computers and refurbished them to train parents on how to use them and provide oversight for their family. After the six week training course, families are allowed to keep them.

Mr. Gary Freeman, the principal of Hamden High School said that if we provide computers then we should also be concerned about connectivity and there should be free wifi in housing projects. Senator Harp said that ATT and Comcast give reduced wifi but not free. Mr. Highsmith mentioned that it was \$9.95 a month.

Mr. Moran moved on to the next recommendation about success plans to strengthen middle schools. Mary Ann Handley brought up the topic of child care licensing as discussed in the previous meeting. She believes that the Department of Education should be involved in licensing child care with the Department of Public Health. She mentioned that this program has the highest standard but worst oversight.

The task force members discussed the possibility of all day kindergarten which already had a partial law on it. Representative Rojas reminded the group that they were charged with discussing the age of kindergarten. The task force discussed that they wanted to create and improve the home visitation system. They also talked about extended the day or extended the number of days in the school year. Zimmerman remarked that if they consider having an after school program that it would need an educational component. Senator Harp wondered how they are using the grants by district. She said they funding tends to drift away from its original purpose.

Kennedy wanted to make sure that the task forces uses the best practice to eliminate the achievement gap and noted that CREC does a good job. Representative Guiliano wondered what the optimal learning time was for high school students were. Mary Ann Handley noted that at one point she tried to change high school's start time to an hour and a half later than what it currently is. She said that idea did not bode well.

Senator Harp said that schools are still based on the 1950's version of family and a lot has changed since. She wants to reform the school system. Freeman noted that it would cause a problem with the timing of other schools if one local school in the district changes for example with athletics. He suggested making a district wide change instead of a single school. Cardona agreed, he said it would disrupt the harmony that already exists. The task force members agreed that there would be some blowback from these ideas and mentioned that they should form a workgroup. They all noted that the curriculum needs a lot of work and that if a number of students are not passing the curriculum every year something needs to change. Senator Harp wanted someone to audit the Curriculum. She also mentioned that if we don't keep shining a light on the achievement gap and keep it in the public's attention, all the work they have done last year will be forgotten. Senator Stillman wanted to release the report to the Governor's office to address the gaps in education.

DeFranco noted that we have to have high standards in the curriculum especially in math. He also said that teachers need to be given development on principals on how to teach. He also mentioned that on an international level the curriculum was not doing well. He said there should be fewer topics but go into greater detail. The three things they need to look over are (1) show the teachers how to implement the curriculum (2) align the text books more precisely to the curriculum and (3) show teachers how to teach. He stressed the importance of the text books and said that of the material is good there will be better teachers. Highsmith agreed, he said the curriculum is the most important thing. Throwing together a bunch of lesson plans does not constitute a curriculum.

Kennedy and Zimmerman stressed the importance of external accountability. Jason Rojas wondered if they should develop benchmarks possibly with SDE. SDE recently adopted a state wide education committee. DeFranco agreed, he said there needs to be benchmarks to look at the data and decide what recommendations are working. They discussed what needs to be done for chronic absenteeism. There needs to be a clear definition on what absents are excusable and what is not. The committee also discussed the need for an increased urban field experience for students who are going to become teachers. Cardona mentioned that teachers need more experience in urban districts and these students want to be in the areas that they are most needed.

Mary Ann Handley mentioned that Connecticut has the widest achievement gap and wealth gap. Stillman agreed and said even within the same town you can see a wealthier high school and a poorer one. Different high schools should not have different standards. The task force discussed that they need to alert the Attorney General to see if the rising price of a G.E.D is a legal issue. The task force also decided that they wanted demographics on alternate schools. One member wondered if there should be late

afternoon school sessions similar to an additional year of prep school before going to college.

Miguel Cardona, in agreement with others, set the date for the next meeting on Sept 19th, from 9:30-12pm as a working meeting, Oct 9th, from 10-12pm for presentations and Oct 22nd from 9:30-12pm for another working meeting. The meeting adjourned at 12:04pm.