



Ray Rossomando
Connecticut Education Association

Before the

Achievement Gap Task Force

Connecticut Education Association

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An affiliate of the
National Education Association

Master Plan to Eliminate the Achievement Gap in Connecticut

April 17, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Dr. Cardona, and members of the Task Force. Thank you for inviting Connecticut Education Association to speak today on behalf of the 43,000 active and retired teachers we represent.

My name is Ray Rossomando, Research and Policy Development Specialist for CEA. CEA members teach approximately 450,000 school age students in Connecticut, including over 145,000 (75%) of Connecticut students who qualify for free or reduced priced lunch.

Every day, Connecticut's teachers witness the causes and effects of achievement gaps among Connecticut students. Teachers know that young children who have families that can provide greater opportunities to learn – opportunities that are often cost-prohibitive to families with lower incomes – are better prepared to learn than those without such opportunities. They know that providing children with high quality early childhood programs taught by certified teachers leads to a stronger foundation and readiness to learn. They know that parental engagement in their children's schooling improves student growth and development. Teachers recognize that such factors are the cause and effect of cyclical poverty and must be addressed holistically – focusing on just one point of influence will not break the cycle.

Promoting student growth and development means addressing issues of poverty, nutrition, housing opportunities, health and well-being, community and parental engagement, and child development among others. Schools and teachers can't accomplish this alone.

We commend the task force for recognizing the myriad factors that exacerbate the gap and the necessity to marshal a variety of resources and expertise to close it.

Given the growing over-reliance on statewide standardized testing in Connecticut and beyond, it would seem that all that we ask of our schools is to prepare students for tests in math and language arts. The reality is that this over-focus is diverting resources away from the many other goals of our local schools.

Within the school doors, CEA members respond to the well-rounded educational goals of our society, and constitutional obligation, to prepare all students:

"... to be responsible citizens able to participate fully in democratic institutions, such as jury service and voting, and to prepare them to progress to institutions of higher education, or to attain productive employment and otherwise to contribute to the state's economy."¹

Our members also coordinate pre-school opportunities with children and their families, and help connect their experience to kindergarten. They teach language skills to ESL students, life skills to the physically and developmentally impaired, and coping skills to students facing social and emotional challenges. They serve as role models, advisors, and life-coaches. They strive to help all students grow – to do better tomorrow than they did today.

CEA is a member-driven organization that works to improve teaching and learning by providing resources, assistance, and a variety of professional development workshops and seminars to our members. We engage in partnerships to hold regional parent engagement seminars. We continually research and advocate policies that strengthen public education for Connecticut's communities. And we partner with school districts and other public education agencies and groups to help teachers implement school improvement initiatives more effectively.

CEA also advocates positive working conditions, which are critical to enhancing learning conditions. One example of this is our work on school climate, a policy initiative supported in the task force report that has increasing relevance and proven successes across the country. There is mounting evidence that improving school climate can result in a number of positive outcomes, including increasing student achievement.²

What is "school climate?" School climate reflects the shared ideas, assumptions, values, beliefs, and practices that define a school's culture and standards for expected behavior.³ A positive school climate contributes to learning by focusing on essential components, including health and safety, bullying prevention, and ensuring that a school's learning environment is sensitive to its culturally and linguistically diverse student body.⁴

¹ Connecticut Supreme Court: CCJEF v. Rell, 2010

² Hirsch, E., Sioberg, A., Robertson, J., & Church, K. (2011). *Improving teacher working conditions: Lessons from North Carolina schools*. Retrieved from http://ncteachingconditions.org/sites/default/files/attachments/NC10_brief_ImprovingTWC.pdf

³ Tableman, B. & Herron, A. (2004.) School climate and learning. *Best Practice Brief*. (31).

⁴ McNeely, C. A., Nonnemaker, J. M., & Blum, R. W. (2002). Promoting student connectedness to school: Evidence from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health. *Journal of School Health*, 72, 138-146.

Efforts to address a school's climate can also promote strong relationships between teaching and learning by building a greater level of professional trust.⁵

There is mounting evidence that school climate policies can have a positive impact on professional working conditions, teacher retention, and as a result, student achievement. For example, North Carolina implemented an annual statewide teacher survey to specifically improve the professional school climate. Through this effort, many North Carolina school districts have fostered a culture of mutual trust and respect ultimately leading to an improved learning environment; it has also helped to reduce costly turnover of experienced teachers in schools.⁶

In Connecticut, school climate efforts are still in their infancy. School climate surveys, although required by statute, focus primarily on bullying prevention. While this is a very worthy goal, there is great opportunity to do more within existing school climate requirements and resources. But current surveys are inconsistent across school districts and wholly inadequate for some.

Opportunities for improvement may be lost as a result. CEA believes that it can offer assistance in promoting more positive school climates. CEA has and can continue to provide school climate surveys for use by school districts, and we would be happy to work with the task force to strengthen the potential for school climate policy to address achievement gaps in all of our schools.

We also urge members to recognize that among the greatest resources available to help address the achievement gap are teachers whose experience, observations, and insights working with students affected by the gap go underutilized. As the task force continues its work, we hope that you will consider opportunities to promote collaboration among teachers with expertise and success in addressing achievement gap challenges. Such efforts could be particularly beneficial if they are disseminated as successful practices for local adaptation, integrated into professional learning, and incorporated into teacher preparation in a more practical and timely way.

We also urge members to recognize that teachers are professionals who do not seek incentives or rewards for finding strategies that work with their students. Teachers are professionals who seek to do their best because they are inspired to make a difference in lives of their students. But like any other professional – doctors, lawyers, engineers – teachers are more effective when they have the opportunities, tools, and conditions to do their job successfully.

To address the unique needs of every child facing an achievement gap, teachers need time to collaborate with peers. They need access to special expertise and targeted and sufficient resources. And they need continual access to professional growth and training.

In an increasingly complex society it is important to recognize that our teachers, along with our schools, have continually been evolving and improving. Classrooms in 2014 are not like the classrooms of 1984 and teachers today are asked to do so much more with so much less. As you

⁵ Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2010). *School climate brief*, 1(1).

⁶ Hirsch, E., Sioberg, A., Robertson, J., & Church, K. (2011). *Improving teacher working conditions: Lessons from North Carolina schools*. Retrieved from http://ncteachingconditions.org/sites/default/files/attachments/NC10_brief_ImprovingTWC.pdf

finalize your report, we urge task force members to facilitate this continual evolution and improvement by including recommendations that engage teachers and foster collaboration on the critical challenges the achievement gap presents.

Thank you.

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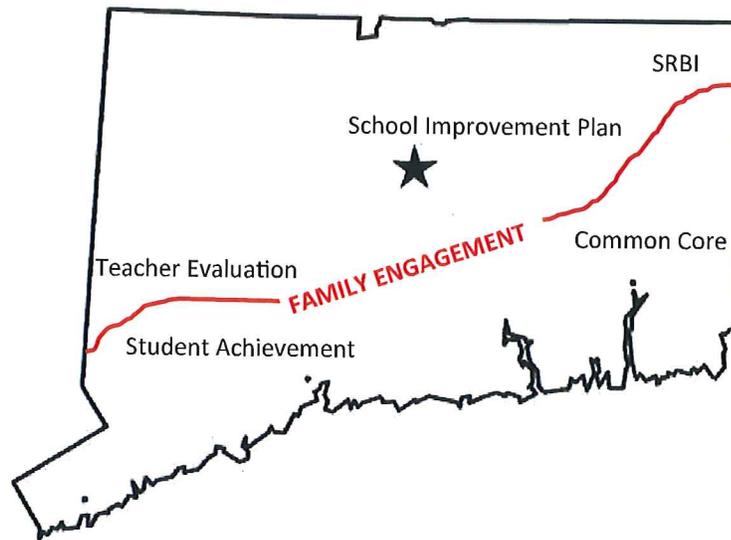
For more
information:

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LINKING FOR LEARNING

Tuesday May 6, 2014

1:30-4:45pm & 5:30-7:30pm



Sponsors:



Empowering Communities.
Changing Lives.

Keynote Speaker:

Karen Mapp, Ed. D., Director of Education Policy and Management at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a consultant to the U.S. Department of Education for Family and Community Engagement.

1:30-4:45pm

**Mapping the Way: Family Engagement for Driving Student Success
Schools & Districts**

Session A—School-Parent Compacts

Session B—The ASPIRE Survey

Session C—Welcoming Schools

5:30-7:30pm

**Mapping the Way: Rethinking our Direction for Engaging Parents
Parents, Teachers, Administrators, & Community Members**

To register, please call 860-257-9782 or go to: (*by May 1st)

<https://www.regonline.com/linkingforlearning>

*Space is limited, pre-registration is required



PARENT TEACHER
COMMUNITY
FORUM

**COMMON CORE STANDARDS:
LOOK CLOSER. UNDERSTAND MORE.**

COMMON CORE

**Keynote Speaker: Sandra Alberti
Student Achievement Partners**

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 25, 2014
8:30 am - 2:00 pm**

**Cromwell High School
34 Evergreen Road, Cromwell**

**Continental breakfast
and lunch provided**

**Please register for this event on the CEA website at
www.regonline.com/ptc_commoncore**

Or call AFT CT at 860-257-9782

WHO SHOULD ATTEND

- ✦ Parents
- ✦ Community Members/Organizations
- ✦ Policy Makers – State, Local, and Agencies
- ✦ Educators – Teachers, Support Professionals and Administrators
- ✦ School Board Members
- ✦ Students – Middle School and High School levels
- ✦ Union Leaders and Union Staff

THIS FORUM WILL

- ✦ Provide a common understanding about Common Core Standards and Smarter Balanced Assessments.
- ✦ Demonstrate Smarter Balanced Assessments and allow opportunities for hands-on practice tests.
- ✦ Encourage career and college readiness for students, as well as the importance of citizenship.
- ✦ Allow all stakeholders to engage in meaningful discussions about Connecticut's implementation of Common Core Standards/Smarter Balanced Assessments.

The power of a great public education is YOU. That's why we are asking you—families, community members, teachers, principals, school leaders and students to partner together to make your good public schools even better.

Whether it's your first time getting involved or your hundredth time, we encourage you to join us in a new series of Community Forums. They are an exciting and informative way to partner with your neighbors and colleagues. Only by working together can you ensure an educated population—one that makes your community stronger economically, socially, and politically.

The forums are sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers Connecticut, Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, Connecticut Education Association, Connecticut Federation of School Administrators, Connecticut National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Connecticut Parent Teacher Student Association, Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services and Adult Education, Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, and Urban League of Greater Hartford. We invite you to participate in a series of Community Forums structured to assist in making schools great.

Ideally, teams consisting of teachers, principals, parents, community members and students will attend Community Forums together. Of course, individuals also are welcome and often lead the charge for school improvement. Make a commitment to attend Community Forums!

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Forum Workshops

Session A: School-Parent Compacts: A Catalyst for Authentic School-Parent Cooperation and Partnerships for Learning

Wouldn't it be great if the administrators and teachers at a school—particularly a school with many at-risk students—could sit down with parents and exchange ideas about what part each might play in supporting students' learning? Imagine if parents could hear directly from teachers what teachers believe their kids most need to learn, how teachers plan to structure that learning, and precisely what parents can do at home to reinforce it. What if teachers could hear each caregiver's view on what most helps his or her particular child? And what if this meaningful interaction could happen through an existing protocol, one that most schools now perceive as a burdensome requirement? Learn how to transform school-family compacts, which all Title I Schools are required to create, from boilerplate language into vehicles for collaboration.

Presenters: Judy Carson, Ph.D., *Program Manager, School-Family-Community Partnerships*, CT State Department of Education and Patti Avallone, *Consultant to the CT State Department of Education for School-Family-Community Partnerships*

Session B: The ASPIRE Survey: Inventorying the Talents of Parent and Community Members

This interactive workshop will offer participants the opportunity to experience an electronic, web-based survey designed to increase parent and community engagement in schools. By conducting an inventory of six factors: Assets, Skills, Professions, Interests, Relationships, and the Environment (ASPIRE), participants will learn to utilize them within a context that connects their value to the school's educational programs and activities. The identified "human capital data" collected through the ASPIRE Survey provides a searchable databank of resources and information for supporting schools by engaging parents and community members in meaningful and purposeful ways.

Presenters: Michele Femc-Bagwell, Ph.D., *University of Connecticut, Neag School of Education*, Jocelyn Ault, *CommPACT Parent Resource Center Coordinator, Bassick High School, Bridgeport, CT*, Jennifer Delaney, *Teacher/Parent Cadre Leader, West Side Middle School Waterbury*, Jassie Myers, *CommPACT Parent Resource Center Coordinator, West Side Middle School, Waterbury, CT*

Session C: Welcoming Schools: Creating Inviting Places for Teachers, Students and Families

When schools create a welcoming environment, they become inviting places where students feel safe and want to learn, school employees want to work, and families want to be involved. The welcoming walkthrough assessment is designed to examine four specific areas: the physical environment, school-wide practices and policies, staff attitude, and written materials. By using the Welcoming Walkthrough Tool Kit, participants learn how to assess the climate of their school and develop a plan to create a welcoming climate to engage families and the community.

To improve outcomes for all students, participants in this session will learn the value of family engagement in school climate issues, and will review the guidelines for conducting a welcoming walkthrough in their schools.

Presenter(s): Betsy LeBoriosis, *Program Manager for Youth and Family Development, CREC*