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Testimony of Dr. Sonia BasSheva Manjon, LPRAC Commissioner  
Achievement Gap Taskforce Committee Public Hearing  
Monday, January 9, 2012  
10:00 AM in Room 1A of the LOB

Good morning members of the Achievement Gap Taskforce Committee. My name is Dr. Sonia BasSheva Manjon, I'm a board member of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC), Vice President of Institutional Partnerships and Chief Diversity Officer at Wesleyan University, and most importantly, a parent of two brown skinned boys in the Middletown and Hartford Public School systems. I am here today in my capacity as a LPRAC Commissioner and to submit our agency recommendations, which focus specifically on two issues: institutionalized racism and lack of support services for Latino English Language Learners.

LPRAC, for the record, was created by an Act of the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) in 1994 to make recommendations to the members of the CGA and the Governor for new or enhanced policies that will foster progress in achieving educational success, economic self-sufficiency, end discrimination, improve public safety and achieve health equity in Connecticut. LPRAC is particularly interested in legislative discussions that enhance families' access to high-quality early childhood educational opportunities, legislation that aims at closing the achievement gap and improves the low graduation rates for Latino English language learners and other minority students. We, at LPRAC, also support programs that prepare all youth for college success and job skill development for the trades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, promote meaningful collaborations between schools and communities (parents, organizations, churches, colleges, and other needed sectors), broaden and strengthen the curriculum for all students, and support dual language education. Furthermore, it is imperative that school administrators and policymakers realize and take seriously the impact of under resourced communities and schools, and institutional racism on the quality of education, specifically but not exclusively, in our CT urban public schools that serve high numbers of Latino, African American, and poor students. As a result we support legislation that aims at increasing retention and graduation rates, college and career readiness, and after school and weekend programs for both parents and students.

I want to bring to your attention the recent report released by the State Education Resource Center (SERC), *Equity in Education: A Transformative Approach*. I was dismayed that the Governor's Education Workshop on Closing the Achievement Gap did not reference this report nor was there a single session on race and racism in education or on institutionalized racism. The report outlines racial disparities, discipline gaps, special education, graduation rates, student achievement, and offers

discourse and action to eliminate systemic inequities in schools and districts. It references five critical elements: 1) leaders who demand high expectations for all students; 2) educators who develop a deep level of racial consciousness that challenge their own practices, school practices, and instructional decision-making; 3) school climate - learning environments that provide for a variety of connecting points for all students, and especially for students of color where the links don't already or obviously exist; 4) school-family-community partnerships. Research demonstrates that "culturally responsive," "culturally appropriate," and "culturally congruent" and effective schools have high levels of parental engagement and improved academic achievement for all students regardless of the racial/ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic background of students;<sup>1</sup> and 5) teaching and learning - the creation of an educational system that fosters a just and inclusive pluralistic society that all students and groups will perceive as legitimate.

Your committee, as you already know, is charged with creating a "master plan" to close the achievement gap. LPRAC respectfully submits to this taskforce the following recommendations for English Language Learners<sup>2</sup> (ELL) that we, at LPRAC, gathered for the CGA via our Results Based Accountability (RBA) session, *Turn the Curve*. Recommendations that have already begun to be widely accepted by organizations such as the Connecticut Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights in their latest report released in 2010 entitled *Dropouts to Diplomas: Closing the Attainment Gap in Connecticut High Schools*. We submit to you three recommendations that originate from an list of ten that were sent to Washington DC:

1. The legislature, Connecticut State Department of Education, and school districts should take steps to ensure that Connecticut teachers are adequately prepared to teach ELL students, including the hiring of more ELL teachers, including those qualified from other states;
2. School districts should examine whether changes in the structure of the school day may assist ELL students and develop approaches that allow them to keep pace with their non-ELL peers while acquiring their English skills through constructive exposure to English and through coordination of ELL programs with community after-school programs; and
3. School districts should inform public policymakers regarding the need for critical and high quality programs and policies with efforts to identify and promote current best practices for these programs<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Equity in Education: A Transformative Approach. (2011) Page 17. See further references in endnotes 34.

<sup>2</sup> Note: "ELL students represent a large and growing part of Connecticut's student population. *"The most common non-English language spoken by Connecticut school children is Spanish."*<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact seventy-one percent of ELL students in Connecticut are Hispanic. Due to the difficulties many ELL students face in an English learning environment, they are often at a greater risk of failing to complete school than their English-speaking classmates." – Connecticut Voices of Children

<sup>3</sup> English Language Learning Students in Connecticut Fact Sheet, July 2010 by Connecticut Voices for Children. Prepared by Annemarie Hillman, Lauren Velazquez, M.P.P., and Cy Oppenheimer, J.D.



We, at LPRAC, also urge you to consider the recent population shift and other socio-economic factors affecting Latinos in our state. Connecticut as you already know has 3,574,097 people, according to the Federal Census Bureau’s latest information released at the beginning of 2011 – 479,087 are of Hispanic or Latino descent or roughly 13.4 percent of the overall population. This signifies an incredible growth of almost 50 percent since 2000. The Latino population in our state is growing twelve times faster than the general population with a growing Latino student population that already reached 17% of the overall K-12 system. Connecticut’s workforce is declining rapidly due to the high number of “baby-boom” generation retirements. On the other hand, an increasing share of the racial-ethnic groups who could replace said retirements in our state have dramatic education achievement gaps and low attainment rates. The result is an enormous void of capable workers to sustain the workforce. LPRAC is alerting state lawmakers to be aware of the potential additional socio-economic costs to our state resulting from these demographic and educational disparities should no steps be taken to rectify the situation. LPRAC is convinced that Connecticut’s economic future rest on our ability to raise the level of education of all its residents, particularly our Latino and African American populations.

Regrettably, we know it is not easy nor can it be a quick fix, to break the cycle of poverty, close the achievement and attainment gaps as evidenced by the years that this problem has affected our state. However, this is exactly why we ought to encourage our state leaders to accept the challenge given to us recently by Governor Dannel P. Malloy and “...work to craft legislation that is strong enough to make Connecticut a national leader in closing the achievement gap, and comprehensive enough to set the stage for a restoration of Connecticut as a model of academic excellence for all.”

So I leave you with this quote from the SERC Report *Equity in Education*, “Given that race is a socio-political construct, that is, it has no biological or genetic basis; given that there are no inherent cognitive differences amongst people of different races; given that, as educators, we are legally obligated to provide equal educational opportunities for all students; given that we claim to have district and school missions to produce equity in education in both the learning environments and student outcomes; and given that as educators, we so often – and usually very passionately – state that we believe all students can learn, such racial disparities in achievement data should not exist. We must ask ourselves then: How is it that we CONTINUALLY REPRODUCE PATTERNS OF RACIAL INEQUITY in Connecticut schools?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Equity in Education: A Transformative Approach. (2011) Page 8. See further references in endnotes 12.



Thank you for your time and commitment to these issues. We at LPRAC look forward to our continuous input into this very important debate.