

TESTIMONY

For: Jen Alexander

What: Achievement Gap Task Force

Where: LOB Room 2A

When: Thursday, April 17, 11 a.m.

Hello, and thank you for inviting me to speak. I'd like to begin by saying that the mere existence of this comprehensive plan is an important step for Connecticut.

Our schools need to prepare our children for the jobs of tomorrow so Connecticut is a place where people want to live, work, and companies want to invest and hire. That's why we need to ensure all kids have the tools they need to succeed, starting at an early age.

The establishment of this task force was itself critical progress toward that goal. While this task force's mandate runs out in six years, the impact of your work will hopefully be felt when my own grandchildren begin to attend public school, which, with any luck, won't be for several decades.

The Master Plan you have developed contains some promising recommendations. My team at ConnCAN found a lot to like in the report, and I'm grateful for the chance to share some of our observations, and some additional recommendations.

ConnCAN is particularly encouraged by the focus on early care and education, especially early literacy. Connecticut must expand access to pre-Kindergarten programs to help eliminate gaps and give all kids a fair chance at success. The report offers essential policy recommendations, like providing full-day, year-round, high-quality preschool for all low-income children, and establishing a preK-Grade 3 literacy approach. As we move to expand preschool, we must maintain a focus on giving parents a choice among a range of quality of programs and providing parents with clear information about those options, including information about program effectiveness. We must also take a cautionary look at the recommendations here about teacher certification. While we want to ensure sufficient quality requirements, we also should be careful not to impose requirements that would keep talented and effective early childhood educators out of the classroom. For example, we should find ways to allow seasoned and excellent teachers aides to become head teachers without having to jump through unnecessary hoops.

We are also in favor of the policy recommendations around Common Core State Standards implementation. These standards are a critical step towards ensuring that all of our students are on a path to success in college and careers. We support the recommendations for the State Department of Education to provide additional support around model curriculum selection or development. Each district has its own unique needs and therefore has flexibility to select and develop its own curricula. However, we know that far too many curricula and textbooks are marketing themselves as "common core-aligned." Connecticut could follow the lead of states like Louisiana that have reviewed and rated these claims to help districts and schools make smart textbook, technology and curricula choices. This

may be of particular help to low-performing school districts or those school districts with the largest achievement gaps. We also recommend that the state work with districts to find clear and user-friendly ways to explain these standards to families, show them how their children are progressing and what families could do at home to help their children meet these new expectations.

Because we support raising expectations for all students, we also support the recommendations to increase access to and success rates in AP courses. To help increase college preparedness, the Task Force might also want to consider how we can help students prepare for the new SAT, by, for example, using new, free online resources that will be available from the College Board and Kahn Academy.

We are also supportive of the efforts to move away from our out-dated agrarian school schedule to extend learning time. As we do so, we must continue to work with resources like the National Center on Time and Learning to ensure that this extra time is well spent on providing children with the academic and non-academic enrichment they need to be fully prepared for the challenges ahead of them in college and careers.

Similarly, we are in favor of recommended monetary and working condition incentives to help grow and retain effective teachers and principals, with a special focus on early reading, hard-to-staff subject areas and high-needs schools. The focus of these programs must be on demonstrated effectiveness on the job, as measured by our state's performance review system that factors in student achievement growth. To ensure that every school has high-performing teachers, those educators whose students do not show improvement should be offered the professional development they need. In addition, Connecticut should re-examine preparation, recruitment and licensure reciprocity policies that may enhance or inhibit our efforts to attract effective teachers and leaders, particularly educators of color.

We are also in favor of other recommendations designed to incentivize highly qualified educators to teach in low-performing school districts, such as rigorous and comprehensive admissions standards, accountability for robust content knowledge and ensuring that teacher prep programs include experiences relevant to the job of educating students in failing or low-performing schools. We particularly need to improve educator preparation programs to prepare educators who will work in or lead school turnaround efforts, and should consider creating alternative programs specifically designed for this purpose that include school-based work experience with highly effective mentors.

ConnCAN would like to suggest three additions to the report.

First, the Commissioner's Network, now including 11 schools has had measurable success since its initial cohort of four schools were invited to join. We feel that the Commissioner's Network law, aimed at turning around our lowest performing schools, could be made more robust to allow these schools a fuller range of flexibility to improve student outcomes.

Second, we recommend that the section on creativity and innovation include a discussion of increasing access for students and educators to individualized, mastery-based student learning opportunities that would include the use of new technologies, blended learning opportunities, and online resources.

Third, the report does not mention providing families with access to more high quality education options, including magnets and public charter schools. As you know over 4,000 families are currently on waitlists to attend Connecticut's charter schools, because these schools are delivering results and preparing kids for success in college and careers. Increasing access to high quality options and allowing families to choose the best school for their children is and must remain an important part of our state's efforts to allow our educators to innovate, to close the achievement gap and to raise the bar for everyone.

This task force is at the start of a long road toward a lofty goal of narrow and eliminating our state's vexing, worst-in-the-nation achievement gap. The Master Plan wisely places emphasis on leadership, and rightly demands "high expectations of all stakeholders, at every level." We agree-- no child in our state should be unfairly denied the chance for a great education because of the color of their skin or because they can't afford it. We look forward to lending our advocacy efforts to refining these recommendations into policy and practice so that every child in Connecticut must have access to great teachers, principals, and public schools.

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