

To: Members of the Achievement Gap Task Force

From: Judith Goldfarb, Child, Parent and Teacher Advocate

Re: A Master Plan to Eliminate the Achievement Gap in Connecticut:

The Achievement Gap Task Force Report to the General Assembly, February 2014

(The Plan)

Date: April 15, 2014

I applaud and support the work on The Master Plan. Inside and Outside the School House concepts are critical. However I am offering suggestions that would strengthen your recommendations in both areas identified and those not in The Plan. I would be pleased to talk with you about any of the concepts identified below. I can be reached at 860.729.9510 or goldfarbjg@gmail.com.

**In The Plan:**

- Poverty
- Housing
- Family Engagement
- Administrator Preparation and Development
- Teacher Preparation
- Principal and Teacher Hiring and Retention
- School Climate
- Use of Curriculum

**Outside The Plan that Must be Included:**

- Math
- Comprehensive School Health (Physical and Mental Health)

**Poverty.** While the policies addressed in this section of The Plan are necessary, a broader look at dual generation programs could be included in this section, **Family Engagement and Early Childhood.**

All families want to be economically stable, but fragmented programs and policies intended to help them often address the needs of children and parents separately, leaving either the child or parent behind and dimming each family's chance at success. If a child is in high -quality early education, but a parent lacks the educational opportunities needed for a good - paying job; the family will continue to struggle, and the child will not have access to the resources and stability to thrive. Similarly, if a parent has opportunities to build skills for high-demand jobs, but a child

lacks access to high-quality child care and early education; both will struggle to advance. Both parents together need educational opportunities to achieve a life of economic security. Programs and policies that continue to address the needs of children and parents separately undermine the efficiency and efficacy of efforts to promote family economic security and educational success. In a time of budget scarcity, we need to realize a strong return on our investments. Exploring new ways to better utilize and children and integrate services, systems, and funding is critical in today's environment. Long-lasting results will only come when we look at the whole family's needs and potential together.

There exists a comprehensive system of quality multi-generational supports that work in concert with cross-agency opportunities to empower all Connecticut families to be successful allowing for communities where poor children and their parents get to learn together, can access quality early childhood programs while participating in Adult Education, ESL, wrap around services, family support services, post-secondary education and sectorial job training leading to long-term learning and economic success.

- Help children reach their full potential as learners by extending learning and supporting high levels of educational success for children birth to age seven and their parents;
- Provide literacy and math training for their parents (adult education, high school diploma, ELL classes);
- Provide literacy and math services of sufficient hours and duration to make sustainable changes in a family;
- Provide integrated instructional services for families, where children and their parents learn together to develop habits of life-long learning;
- Help parents become full partners in the education of their children (parenting education) and
- Support families committed to education and to economic independence with services along a continuum to post-secondary education and certificate training.

**Housing.** Supports identified in The Plan are good, but not inclusive enough to support the large number of teen parents in this state. The difficult life circumstances of most teenage mothers and their children have intensified interest in finding ways to support young mothers in their efforts to become self-sufficient, delay subsequent childbearing, and promote awareness of child development early in their children's lives in order to break the cycle of poverty and reliance on welfare. One innovative service delivery option available is the establishment of "Second Chance Homes" for teenage mothers and their children. Second Chance Homes offer stable housing and other supportive services to teenage mothers, with the intent of providing teens with the skills and knowledge necessary to become more effective parents and lead productive, independent lives. Supportive services could be *"entities (or agencies) that provide custodial parents under the age of 19 and their children with a safe, supportive and supervised living arrangement in which such parents would be required to learn parenting skills, including child development,*

*family budgeting, health and nutrition, and other skills to promote their long-term economic independence and the well-being of their children."*

**Administrator Preparation.** Ideas presented in The Plan should also include existing administrators, not just aspiring administrators.

**Highly Effective Teacher Preparation Programs.** With Connecticut's Latino population nearing nearly 40%, it is time for the state to consider providing more academic courses in Spanish at the associates level with transition plans for degree attainment in English. Connecticut needs many more bilingual teachers, not only to deal with young students who are dual language learners, learning both their home language and English, but many of these same students do not have family who speak English. Courses could utilize approaches from the Sheltered Instruction Observation English language Protocol (SIOP) which includes the following elements: 1) lectures modified to exclude heavy use of idiomatic expressions at a pace of speech appropriate for the ELL group's aural comprehensibility level; 2) hands on materials, 3) graphic organizers, and 4) authentic activities that integrate lesson concepts with language practice opportunities. In order to truly engage all families, we must have teachers who can communicate with them.

**Principal and Teacher Hiring and Retention.** Principals are the greatest source of impact. They improve organizational capacity leading to strengthening instructional capacity and thereby improving student learning. They need the supports and training in the above areas, both through coaching and classroom. They also need help in developing leadership teams at the building level to succeed.

Teachers need the opportunities and guidance to have peer learning teams within the building, both horizontally within grade levels and vertically among the younger and older grade levels.

**School Climate (and Quality Environments).** This section needs to be clearer about including adult behavior in schools, not just training adults to work with children. In addition, schools shall be equipped with appropriate materials to provide quality learning environments for children. Thus, adding *Quality Environments* to this section would bring this concept forward.

**Use of Curriculum.** While the concepts of *citizenship and democracy* could fall within this category, it might need its own section in The Plan. Closing the achievement gap is not just about adult leadership but also student leadership at every grade level. Quality learning environments that promote democratic inclusion and participation and can help create a foundation for engaged citizens, both as children and youth, and as adults. When students have opportunities to exercise leadership and participate in school-supported community involvement, there are positive consequences for academic and social engagement. Complex, cooperative learning activities improve social and intellectual skills, such as communication and critical thinking, and reduce success gaps among students.

These activities also have a significant effect on students' attitudes about civic participation and their interactions. There are a number of ways to measure citizenship in schools. For example, the Civic Education Study (CIVED) was used in 28 countries to assess students' knowledge of

fundamental principles of democracy; their skills in interpreting political communication; their concepts of democracy and citizenship; their attitudes related to their nation, trust in institutions, opportunities for immigrants and the political right of women; and their expectations about future participation in civic activities including voting, peaceful protest, and raising money for a cause.

**Math.** "We find the single most important factor in predicting later academic achievement is that children begin school with a mastery of early math and literacy concepts," said Northwestern University researcher Greg Duncan. "Mastery of early math skills predicts not only future math achievement, it also predicts future reading achievement," Duncan said. "And it does so just as reliably as early literacy mastery of vocabulary, letters and phonetics predicts later reading success." The opposite -- reading skills predicting math success -- does not hold up.

Young children have a surprising capacity to learn substantial mathematics, but most children in the U.S. have a discouraging lack of opportunities to do so. Too many children not only start behind, but they also begin a negative and immutable trajectory in mathematics, with insidious long-term effects. These negative effects are in one of the most important subjects of academic life and also affect children's overall life course. Therefore The Plan must address the exact same policies for math as it does for literacy in the report leading to the result: *Every child will understand and apply mathematical concepts at goal by the end of third grade.* Please see Policy Recommendations at the end of these comments.

**Comprehensive School Health (Physical and Mental Health).** Students' physical and mental health is critically important both for students' long-term well-being and for their ability to contribute to society. Comprehensive school health programs boost academic achievement, reduce behavioral problems and other barriers to learning, and help students develop the skills they need to be physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy for life. A wide array of validated health measures exist that could be adopted for use by schools. For example, the SHAPES program, funded by Prince Edward Island's Ministry of Health, uses school-based surveys to ask students about their physical activity, healthy eating, mental fitness, and tobacco, alcohol, and drug use. Health metrics can be used to track health changes.

Social and emotional skills at every level will contribute directly to students' success in life. While we do place emphasis on social and emotional behavior, we must be intentional about developing these interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, students' ability to work together, to self-regulate, and to manage challenges. These concepts can also be included in the **Curriculum** section of The Plan.

### **Math Policy Recommendations:**

- Grow a tier one, embedded reading coach model of teacher training in the classroom that prepares all teachers, PreK-3, in early literacy assessment, intervention and practice. This model, which is based on proven research in our state and nationally, has led to the greatest number of children moving forward, not entering special education and successfully mastering the skills necessary to become proficient in reading.
- Grow a tier two and tier three model of math intervention for every student not at proficiency in k-3rd grade. Assure each student has an individualized math plan and that each school has the professional capacity and math team to assess, intervene and continuously monitor for on-going math gains of each student.
- Develop a Math Director for SDE in charge of math across all divisions, policies and programs to review data, implement policies, support schools and assure professional development and fidelity to best practices. This position will report directly to the Commissioner and will work in collaboration with the State Turnaround Officer, Chief Academic Officer.
- Develop “Connecticut’s Blueprint for Math Achievement as the focal point for student and teacher competencies and update the research behind it.
- Increase Pool of Math Specialists utilizing research based practice.
- Address time, dosage and content quality. Students who are behind do not learn more in the same amount of time as students who are on track or ahead. Catch-up growth is driven by proportional increases in direct instructional time. Quality instruction, assessment and intervention, coupled with increased time, ensures sufficient daily instructional minutes to achieve additional annual growth at the appropriate grade level.
- Work with Institutes of Higher Education to ensure that new and current faculty members have expertise in the science of math and research-based practices.
- Allocate sufficient instructional time for math which can be integrated in a variety of other subject matter (a minimum 2 hour block for math learning and application).
- Require routine formative assessments in math for all students in K-3 to inform and ensure differentiated instruction, using research-based assessment tools that are teacher friendly, electronic, less costly and that offer more information to teachers on intervention.
- Collect statewide longitudinal data on universal screening and progress monitoring assessments that inform instruction and can be analyzed to highlight schools that are “beating the odds.”
- Build strong, committed school leadership, knowledgeable in K-3 math, on the administrative level to make math a school priority. Link math assessments to state’s leadership strategy so that

school superintendents and principals fully know how to assess the gains in their schools and how to intervene where gains are not evident.

- Hold each district and school accountable for math achievement.
- Create incentives for teachers who consistently improve math outcomes for students in kindergarten through grades three. For example, create a master teacher designation for those teachers who show that they have turned the curve in math within their classroom.
- Provide performance bonuses for teachers who produce improvement in math scores and award a ten-year recertification, rather than a five-year recertification, for teachers with the master teacher designation.
- For teachers who do not show improvement in the math outcomes of their students, ensure that teachers in K-3rd grade receive appropriate professional development in math based on the results of math surveys designed to identify teaching gaps in the science of teaching math.
- Create a partnership with parents on math in low performing schools so that parents know how and what to do at home and at school to facilitate math gains.
- Develop two generational strategies where parents and children are supported in ELL and in overall math gains.