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TESTIMONY REGARDING BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN CONNECTICUT: FOCUS ON NEW BRITAIN

BROKEN DREAMS: A Shameful Case in Disenfranchising Latino Families and Fostering Educational Inequity for Latino Children and Their Families

Me llamo Marina Pérez Taverner y les agradezco esta oportunidad para abogar por nuestros niños latinos en CT y, específicamente, en New Britain.

I have been a bilingual educator for over 35 years in CT in several priority school districts: New Britain; Hartford; New Haven; Norwalk; Bridgeport; and, currently, in New London. My certifications include elementary education, Spanish 7-12, TESOL K-12, bilingual education K-12, and administration and supervision. I have proudly served the latino families and children of this state as a Spanish and bilingual classroom teacher at all grade levels, bilingual resource teacher, bilingual early childhood literacy coach, bilingual curriculum developer, K-12 district supervisor of a Bilingual/ESOL department, and principal of two bilingual schools.

I participated in the development of the initial dual language programs in New Haven where two schools continue to flourish, one being intradistrict and the other interdistrict. I developed, implemented and supervised the Mano-a-Mano Dual Language Program in Norwalk which is also still operating. The trilingual Multicultural Magnet School in Bridgeport was awarded the 2007 U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon under my supervision. In addition, I was named Administrator of the Year after two years as the proud principal of the DiLoreto PK-8 Dual Language Magnet School in New Britain.

After the abrupt closing of our dual language program, I retired and was contracted to work as a dual language instructional coach and specialist at the Adelante Dual Language Program at Jennings School in New London. New London's strategic operating plan includes the implementation of a K-12 Dual Language Pathway, extending the K-5 dual language program to the secondary level. I am proud to participate in that worthy project.

New Britain had a long history of advocacy for latinos and bilingual education since the CT bilingual law was first mandated. For the past 40 years, bilingual education in New Britain was overseen by competent and knowledgeable educators in the field of second language acquisition and bilingual education who advocated relentlessly for our ELLs at the local and state levels. Our ELLs came (and are still arriving) from Latinamerica, Poland, Asia and the

Middle East. Bilingual education programs offered a culturally responsive and research-based education to our youngsters and families. As the research on effective instructional programming for English Language Learners grew over time, bilingual educational programming in New Britain and around the country evolved with that research knowledge base as a foundation. Transitional Bilingual Education programs in New Britain isolated our latino children for 30 months in segregated bilingual classrooms. The 30 month CT law, based on political whim rather on empirical evidence, led to the placement of ELLs into mostly culturally unresponsive mainstream classrooms with little academic support. New Britain, as in other poor districts, did not hire enough ESL teachers to support the growing population of ELLs requiring LTSS services.

The first dual language program in New Britain opened about 20 years ago. It successfully grew with parent and central office advocacy along side smaller, isolated and less than successful TBE programs throughout the district. I need to remind you that the Bilingual Education law provides in writing for the option of offering dual language bilingual education programming to all students, both native English speakers and ELLs, as a viable and effective educational program, based on research.

Severe budget cuts, lack of satisfaction with our TBE programming, and the popularity of the dual language program contributed to New Britain's board of education decision to merge all TBE students into our DiLoreto PK-8 dual language magnet school.

I was delighted to take in our latino ELL children who were not thriving in our other schools and their parents were satisfied to finally participate in the successful dual language school that so many had applied to, but with limited space available. DiLoreto School had made safe harbor, families were applying in great numbers, eighth grade students passed entrance exams into intermediate and high levels of Spanish and mainstream academic courses, and NBHS teachers reported that our students outperformed all others in district in their ability to think critically, communicate, and behave as the international ambassadors that we had taught them to be. Over the years, several former dual language students were named the valedictorian and salutatorian for their graduating class!

In addition, our school data ranked amongst the highest in attendance rate and the lowest suspension rate in the district. Parent survey results increased to over 85% satisfaction rates with very high % of return.

So, what led to the abrupt dismantling of DiLoreto School's dual language program? There were a myriad of factors operating that could answer this question.

The factors that I consider to be most critical to this detrimental decision are:

1. The board of education's irresponsible decision to hire a new superintendent based on an unachievable promise to increase the achievement of English Language Learners within three years. In reality, all that could be promised was increased ENGLISH proficiency, NOT increased academic achievement for our latino ELLs at DiLoreto or elsewhere. The student achievement data published by the superintendent's former district demonstrated an increase in English proficiency and a DECREASE in academic achievement. The Structured English Immersion (SEI) program that was brought here, is a culturally unresponsive method based on English grammar, that segregates students, and did not produce increased academic achievement. The SEI program was dismantled in that district. The board of education hired what amounts to be an empty promise to our community.
2. This brings me to the second critical factor in the abrupt dissolution of the dual language program at DiLoreto and the bilingual education programming in New Britain – NO ADVOCACY from the latino community. Nothing but silence. No educated caucus of latinos and community members spoke out to advocate for bilingual education, parental empowerment and involvement in the educational planning for their children, or educational equity as mandated by federal law.
3. Thirdly, a lack of oversight by the state department of education contributed to the overnight abolition of bilingual education and our dual language program. The superintendent reported to the parents and public that the state department gave him full approval for his plan to replace BE with the SEI method.

RECOMMENDATION: Strengthen the current Bilingual Education law by:

- Removing the 30 month limitation
- Stipulating allowable research-based effective bilingual programming, such as dual language education
- Increasing the number of state department consultants to oversee research-based bilingual programming throughout the state
- Requiring local boards of education to implement bilingual program governing councils, with SDE oversight i.e. SDE training to boards of education and parents of bilingual program students; SDE attendance to bilingual program governing council meetings and monthly reports sent to the SDE commissioner, Latino Caucus, etc.

- Insofar as ALLIANCE monies are concerned, the law should stipulate that any and all money that is allocated to a school or school district for turnaround purposes shall be awarded AFTER a thorough review of the turnaround plan. That review should be conducted by a committee comprised of a majority of experts in the field of study relevant to the turnaround plan and that all educational programming is based in research and evidence. In addition, the turnaround committee will consist of members representative of all stakeholders in that plan, and not appointed by the board of education. I highly recommend that you look into the enormous amount of money that the state gave DiLoreto School to implement a turnaround program that is not empirically based and, in fact, can be detrimental to ELLs. It is a shameful waste of taxpayers dollars and a poorly devised and implemented plan from beginning to end by the commissioner's Alliance office.

The SDE, caucus members and legislators should look beyond our state borders to see what is happening in Massachusetts and New York. I am a member of the tristate consortium of dual language educators in MABE (Massachusetts Association of Bilingual Education) and am very enthused by our progress. But CT is sadly underrepresented in this endeavor.

Ladies and gentlemen:

The situation in New Britain is unacceptable, unconscionable, unlawful, and is a regrettable regression to the overt repression of and racism towards our Puerto Rican American citizens and latino immigrants who arrive in pursuit of the American multicultural dream. What they actually get are purposeful tactics to disengage them in the educational decision-making process and rhetoric about what is good for their children from an assimilationist point of view. The decision makers who hold the power and purse strings in New Britain call themselves educators and advocates for URBAN VOICES. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

(When I testify at the hearing in New London, I can share more experiences and my expertise on dual language education and anything else you want to know about bilingual education in New Britain.)