

# Dropouts to Diplomas:



CLOSING THE ATTAINMENT GAP

IN CONNECTICUT HIGH SCHOOLS

**Connecticut Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights**

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# **Dropouts to Diplomas: Closing the Attainment Gap in Connecticut High Schools**

Briefing Report of the  
Connecticut Advisory Committee  
U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

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## Letter of Transmittal

Connecticut Advisory Committee to  
the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

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The Connecticut Advisory Committee submits this report, *Dropouts to Diplomas: Closing the Attainment Gap in Connecticut High Schools*, as part of its responsibility to advise the Commission on civil rights issues in Connecticut. The Committee approved this report unanimously in a vote of 11 to 0. One member, a school superintendent, recused herself from the vote.

In April 2010, the Committee invited government officials, scholars, advocacy group representatives, community representatives, and the public to participate in a briefing that examined the disparity of academic achievement along racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines, focusing specifically on high school graduation rates in Connecticut's public schools.

Based on the briefings, the Connecticut Advisory Committee offers the enclosed report and findings and recommendations with the aim of improving high school graduation rates in economically disadvantaged school districts and across the state. In distilling best practices, the report focuses on school culture, school leadership, teacher evaluation, teacher retention, parental involvement, data collection, English language learners, and the General Educational Development test:

- Incentives such as higher salaries or generous retirement plans may help retain teachers. As their numbers increase, other high-quality teachers will join them, improving the support systems for these teachers.
- Local school districts and the State Department of Education (SDE) should establish a rigorous, college-ready program of study for all students and identify exemplar programs to extend to local school districts in order to cultivate a strong district and school culture of belonging through mentoring, extracurricular programming, leadership opportunities, college preparation, and supportive, highly-engaging classroom environments.
- Schools need high-quality district leadership to make progress and thrive. The SDE should explore exemplary leadership preparation programs from across the nation to

ensure that certification requirements and educational leadership programming are structured to fully prepare pre-service administrators for positions of leadership. Additionally, school districts should create support structures for school leaders that provide coaching, feedback, and training according to the Common Core of Leading. Such plans should be comprehensive in design and shared among school districts. The SDE should also explore ways to promote the Superintendent's networks so that leadership practices between and among suburban and urban school districts are more collaborative and less isolating.

- Access to high-quality teachers remains a crucial component of academic success. Quality instruction delivered by competent, motivated teachers invested in their students' success is key to high school graduation, and to students' future success in college, careers, and citizenship. Placing and retaining high-quality teachers in underperforming schools and school districts can improve high school attainment rates.
- Often, urban school districts are not able to retain high-quality teachers. Fatigue and burnout often lead high-quality teachers to flee from these districts for more supportive suburban environments. Therefore, the schools with the greatest challenges are often staffed with the least experienced teachers. The SDE should consider incentives to keep high-quality teachers in these districts. One suggested incentive is to allow teachers who work in such districts for a period of time to retire earlier. For example, teachers who work at least 10 years in underperforming or troubled schools could retire after 30 instead of 37 years of service.
- There is a correlation between parental involvement in a child's education and scholastic success. The Connecticut SDE should consider approaches to facilitating parental involvement in school governance structures, such as advisory councils and boards of governance. Teachers and administrators should clearly communicate their expectations to parents and students and should encourage open lines of communication with parents. Parents should be actively encouraged to participate at home in their children's growth toward proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics.
- The Connecticut SDE has made significant progress towards improving its mechanisms for measuring high school graduation rates by adopting the National Governors' Association Compact and implementing a longitudinal data system and a unique student identifier. It should, however, enhance its measures to exercise quality control on the data it receives from school districts to ensure that data is provided consistently across districts.
- English Language Learners (ELL) represent a large and growing part of Connecticut's student population. They are often at a greater risk of failing to complete school than their English-speaking classmates. Connecticut does not have a statewide, comprehensive policy to address the unique needs of ELL students. Therefore, the Connecticut Legislature, Connecticut SDE, and school districts should take steps to ensure that Connecticut teachers are adequately prepared to teach ELL students. Among such measures should be the hiring of more ELL teachers.

- The Connecticut State Board of Education should ensure that GED completion and high school graduation are not treated as equivalent when reporting longitudinal data on student outcomes, and school districts should emphasize to students and their parents that failing to graduate from high school leaves them with fewer opportunities later in life, and that the completion of the GED program does not serve as a substitute for a high school diploma.

The Advisory Committee findings and recommendations are found in more detail in the accompanying report.

The Committee hopes this report serves as a step, albeit an incremental one, toward fulfilling the promise that a high-quality education provides, and assuring a just and prosperous future for the Constitution State.

Sincerely,

Richard A. Wilson, *Chairperson*  
Connecticut Advisory Committee





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## I. Introduction

Dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country – and this country needs and values the talent of every American.<sup>1</sup>

Every nine seconds a student drops out of high school. In the United States today, three out of every 10 students in public schools fail to finish high school with a diploma. The consequences of failing to graduate are striking: high school graduates live five years longer and dropouts have higher rates of unemployment and involvement in the criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup> Dropouts are also more likely to require housing assistance, food stamps, Medicare, and other forms of public assistance, the expense for which is borne by the taxpayers.<sup>3</sup> In effect, “[d]ropping out of high school today is to your societal health what smoking is to your physical health, an indicator of a host of poor outcomes to follow, from low lifetime earnings to high incarceration rates to a high likelihood that your children will drop out of high school and start the cycle anew.”<sup>4</sup> Transforming a single high school dropout to a high school graduate could potentially save the public one million dollars over the course of his/her lifetime — in eliminated criminal justice and healthcare costs as well as earnings from state and federal tax revenues.

Although no community, small or large, rural or urban, has escaped the problem, the vast majority of high school dropouts come from impoverished communities and attend schools in large, urban districts. In Connecticut, the students who drop out are overwhelmingly members of disadvantaged minority groups. This disparity in educational attainment along racial and economic lines promotes inequality in the America of tomorrow.

In Connecticut, the existence of educational disparities appears paradoxical upon first impression. Connecticut, through its Constitution and by judicial interpretation, guarantees not only a right to an education, but also an education free from both de jure and de facto segregation.<sup>5</sup> The state, however, also has one of the largest “achievement gaps” in the nation. While the state has the highest per capita income in the country, the cities of Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport are among the top-ten poorest cities when compared to other cities of their size. Many Connecticut towns and cities have high poverty levels, leaving families unable to send children to pre-kindergarten programs and to nurture their educational progress

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<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama, “Remarks to a Joint Session of Congress” (State of the Union Address Feb. 24, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> There are estimates that young male dropouts are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than four-year college graduates.

<sup>3</sup> “Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves.” John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Jr., and Karen Burke Morison, “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,” <http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf> (last accessed Aug. 16, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Thornburgh, “Dropout Nation,” *Time* (Apr. 9, 2006), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1181646-2,00.html#ixzz0vqmNY2aX> (last accessed August 5, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> De jure segregation is racial separation enforced by specific laws. De facto segregation is racial separation that occurs “as a matter of fact” and in the public school context occurs in school enrollment. Because all de jure laws were eliminated in the United States by the mid-1960s, school segregation is de facto.

throughout the remainder of their schooling. Families are forced to rely on the failing neighborhood public schools, many of which are composed primarily of minority students and English Language Learners. Consequently, the likelihood of a student graduating from high school is strongly correlated to his/her race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status, creating the nation's largest achievement gap between white middle-class communities and low-income minority students.

The Connecticut Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights believed that this disparity of academic achievement along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines warranted closer examination. The Advisory Committee convened a public briefing on April 13, 2010, to gather information from elected officials and government officials, school administrators and teachers, education specialists, and community advocates on high school attainment rates in Connecticut. Similar to many other reports on education, this report concludes that the failure to close the "achievement gap" has significant societal costs and consequences, and not only constitutes the deprivation of civil rights but may also be a harbinger of social and economic maladies in Connecticut. It is the hope of the Committee that this report serves as a step, albeit an incremental one, toward fulfilling the promise that a high-quality education provides and assures a just and prosperous future for the Constitution State.

## **II. Background: Educational Equity, *Brown to Sheff***

Educational equity has been at the front line of the civil rights movement for over a century. From the laws that prohibited teaching slaves to read, to the opposition to racially-segregated public schools, the quest for racial equality has in many ways reached its fullest expression in education. There is bipartisan agreement that the foremost civil rights issue of the twenty-first century is ensuring that every child in America, regardless of race or income, is provided a high-quality education that culminates, at a minimum, in a high school diploma. Simply stated, a high-quality education is the seminal predictor of every child's future.

The march toward equal access to quality public education has its roots in the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*.<sup>6</sup> In *Brown*, the Court held that the segregation of public schools on the basis of race denied children equal educational opportunities and was unconstitutional. The Court concluded, "it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education."<sup>7</sup> A decade after the *Brown* decision, federal legislation was enacted to promote equal access to education. In 1965, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act<sup>8</sup> (ESEA) to promote equal access to education. The ESEA has been re-authorized on numerous occasions, most recently as the "No Child Left Behind" Act.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these judicial and legislative endeavors, equal access to education remains elusive and the nation has not delivered on the fundamental promise of equal opportunity for all children.

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<sup>6</sup> 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 493.

<sup>8</sup> Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Pub. L. No. 89-10, 79 Stat. 27 (1965).

<sup>9</sup> No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2008).

Nationally, test scores and graduation rates reveal that millions of children continue to pass through our nation's public schools without receiving an adequate education, which is critical to the United States' overall competitiveness in a global economy.

*From Brown to No Child Left Behind: Equal Access to Education on the Federal Level*

The Supreme Court held in *Brown v. Board of Education* that state laws that segregated public school students on the basis of race deprived minority children of equal educational opportunities in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.<sup>10</sup> In its unanimous ruling, the Court made the following observation concerning the importance of equal access to quality education:

Today, education is the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.<sup>11</sup>

Citing a sluggish response to its decision, the Court expounded upon its ruling in *Brown* a year later in a companion case (sometimes referred to as *Brown II*), mandating that the desegregation of public schools proceed with "all deliberate speed."<sup>12</sup> Fifty-six years after *Brown*, however, there remains little doubt that inequities regarding access to quality public education persist both on a national and state level.

Congress continued what the Court began when Congress passed the ESEA in 1965 as a component of President Johnson's "Great Society" legislative program. The most recent re-authorization of the ESEA occurred in 2002, when the 107th Congress passed the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB), which was proposed by the administration of President George W. Bush immediately after taking office.<sup>13</sup> The main objectives of NCLB were to promote greater parental and community awareness of school achievement levels, to provide school districts with greater flexibility in the use of federal education funds, to increase federal funding of education programs that have proven effective, and to provide families of students the option of

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<sup>10</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 495 (1954).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 493.

<sup>12</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294, 301 (1955).

<sup>13</sup> An Act to Close the Achievement Gap with Accountability, Flexibility, and Choice, so that No Child is Left Behind, Pub. L. No. 107-110 (2002). The bill was championed by Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy, one of the bill's co-authors, and received overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress; the House of Representatives passed the bill by a vote of 384 to 45 on May 23, 2001 and less than a month later, the Senate passed it by a margin of 91 to 8. It was signed into law by President Bush on Jan. 8, 2002.

transferring their child to a better-performing school within a school district if the child's designated school consistently underperforms for two consecutive years.<sup>14</sup>

The effectiveness of NCLB has been subject to debate. Proponents of NCLB claim that the standardized testing required by the Act enables parents and public officials to understand which schools are underperforming so that they may be held to account.<sup>15</sup> Many, however, counter that such emphasis on standardized testing merely encourages schools to try to increase test scores, rather than focus upon a more well-rounded education.<sup>16</sup> In March 2010, the Obama Administration released its proposal for revising the ESEA.<sup>17</sup> According to Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, although NCLB deserves credit for "greatly expanding" the federal government's ability to hold schools to account for their performance, the rubric by which it measures accountability is flawed: "[I]t allows – even encourages – states to lower standards. It doesn't measure growth or reward excellence. It prescribes the same interventions for schools with very different needs."<sup>18</sup> The Administration's proposal for revising the ESEA calls for using "student academic growth," as opposed to absolute performance on state tests, as a measure of a school's performance.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Promise of Sheff and the Reality of De Facto Segregation*

Although the federal government has sought, through the ESEA and its various reauthorizations, including NCLB, to assure equal access to quality education, there remains no "explicit" right to an education under the United States Constitution.<sup>20</sup> The Connecticut Constitution, by contrast, includes not only the right to an education as a specifically enumerated guarantee,<sup>21</sup> but also a

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<sup>14</sup> United States Department of Education, Overview: Four Pillars of NCLB, <http://ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/4pillars.html> (last accessed May 23, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> PBS Frontline: "Testing Our Schools: President Bush Promises to Leave No Child Behind." <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/nochild/bush.html> (last accessed May 23, 2010); Tehrani, Alex, "How to Fix No Child Left Behind," *Time* (May 24, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> United States Department of Education, Elementary and Secondary Education: Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/index.html> (last accessed May 23, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Secretary Arne Duncan's Testimony Before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and the House Education and Labor Committee on the Obama Administration's Blueprint for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), <http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/03/03172010.html> (last accessed Aug. 8, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1, 35 (1973).

<sup>21</sup> Conn. Const., art. VIII, § 1. "There shall always be free public elementary and secondary schools in the state. The general assembly shall implement this principle by appropriate legislation." In *Horton v. Meskill*, the Connecticut Supreme Court held that the right to education in Connecticut is so basic and fundamental that any intrusion is subject to strict scrutiny. See *Horton v. Meskill*, 376 A.2d 359 (Conn. 1977) (holding that the system of school financing that relied on local property tax revenues without regard to disparities in the financial ability of towns to finance an educational program and that lacked significant equalizing state support was unconstitutional, depriving public school students to equal enjoyment of the right to education).



prohibition on segregation.<sup>22</sup> This coupling of a right to education and freedom from segregation was at issue in the landmark Connecticut Supreme Court case, *Sheff v. O’Neill*, which determined that even de facto segregation in Connecticut public schools was antithetical to the Connecticut Constitution.

In *Sheff*, plaintiffs representing Hartford public school children sued Connecticut, alleging not only that government officials were in part responsible for the “de facto racial and ethnic segregation between Hartford and surrounding suburban public school districts,” but that these officials had in fact perpetuated such segregation.<sup>23</sup> In essence, they were discriminating against the students whose interests they were required to protect. As a result of such discrimination, the plaintiffs argued, Hartford public school students were denied the “equal opportunity to a free public education” required by both the Connecticut Constitution and general laws.<sup>24</sup> The trial court rejected these claims, finding that, in the absence of proof that government action fostered racial isolation, courts could not intervene to change the composition of city and suburban school enrollments.

In 1996, seven years after the plaintiffs filed suit, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that, under the Connecticut Constitution, “extreme racial and ethnic isolation” in public school systems was inherently segregated and unequal,<sup>25</sup> and that the Connecticut legislature was obligated to take remedial action to address such inequities without regard to whether such segregation was codified by law or the result of factors outside the law.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the Court found that the methodology used by the state to determine school districts – in which districts were based on town and city boundary lines – was unconstitutional.<sup>27</sup> The Court directed the legislative and executive branches to fashion a suitable remedy.<sup>28</sup> In *Sheff*, the majority made note of the trial court’s findings regarding the demographic make-up of the Hartford public schools:

Statewide, in the 1991-92 school year, children from minority groups constituted 25.7 percent of the public school population. In the Hartford public school system in that same period, 92.4 percent of the students were members of minority groups, including, predominately, students who were either African-American or Latino. Fourteen of Hartford’s twenty-five elementary schools had a white student enrollment of less than 2 percent. The Hartford public school system currently enrolls the highest percentage of minority students in the state .... A majority of the children who constitute the public

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<sup>22</sup> Conn. Const., art. I, § 20. “No person shall be denied the equal protection of the law nor be subjected to segregation or discrimination in the exercise or enjoyment of his or her civil or political rights because of religion, race, color, ancestry, national origin, sex or physical or mental disability.”

<sup>23</sup> *Sheff v. O’Neill*, 678 A.2d 1267, 1271-72 (Conn. 1996).

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 1271-72.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 1281.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 1283.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 1289. The Court noted that the State’s districting plan “is the *single most important factor* contributing to the present concentration of racial and ethnic minorities in the Hartford public school system .... [T]he districting statute is of critical importance because it establishes town boundaries as the dividing line between all school districts in the state.” *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 1290.

school population in Hartford come from homes that are economically disadvantaged, that are headed by a single parent and in which a language other than English is spoken. The percentage of Hartford schoolchildren at the elementary school level who return to the same school that they attended the previous year is the lowest such percentage in the state.<sup>29</sup>

Nineteen years removed from the 1991-92 data cited by the Connecticut Supreme Court in *Sheff*, and 14 years following the Court's instruction to the Connecticut legislature to take remedial action regarding racial and ethnic isolation in Connecticut public schools, de facto segregation remains a reality in the state, not only along racial and ethnic lines, but economic status as well.

The chronic problem of de facto segregation exists alongside a profound "achievement gap" among Connecticut schoolchildren. According to the 2007 "Nation's Report Card," for example, Connecticut has one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation between poor and non-poor students, as well as between white and non-white students.<sup>30</sup> Correspondingly, Connecticut is among 10 states with the greatest racial disparities in high school graduation rates. African Americans are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school as non-Hispanic whites (13.5 percent versus 5 percent), and Latinos are more than five times as likely to drop out of high school as whites (27.4 percent).<sup>31</sup> Recent studies have indicated that this achievement gap is widening. The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress discerned that Connecticut had the highest achievement gap in the country, based upon eighth-grade reading results.<sup>32</sup>

The exacerbation of de facto segregation has had an adverse economic and social impact on Connecticut. Dropouts from the class of 2006 cost the state more than \$2.3 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over their lifetimes.<sup>33</sup> Without a high school education, there are few economic opportunities for teenagers, particularly in an economic downturn. Poverty is the direct outcome of low educational attainment. According to the Greater Hartford Literacy Council, approximately 300,000 Hartford-area adults, or roughly 41 percent of the adult population, are functioning below the literacy level required to earn a living wage.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, poverty begets low educational attainment for the next generation. Children growing up in impoverished families in Connecticut tend to perform at a lower level on educational tests than do higher-

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<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 1272-73.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007.). *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007*. Washington, DC <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2007/2007497CT4.pdf> (last accessed Aug. 9, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Surveys, 2005-2007, public use files, tabulations by Joseph McLaughlin, Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada (October 2009). "Estimating the Number of High School Dropouts in Connecticut and in Sub-State Areas in 2005-2007: Findings for Young Adults (18-24) and All Working Age Adults (18-64)." [http://www.capitalworkforce.org/youth\\_jobs/documents/091109DropoutEstimates.pdf](http://www.capitalworkforce.org/youth_jobs/documents/091109DropoutEstimates.pdf) (last accessed Aug. 9, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> 2009 NAEP Reading Results Analysis—March 24, 2010, [http://www.conncan.org/sites/default/files/research/2009\\_NAEP\\_Reading\\_Results\\_0.pdf](http://www.conncan.org/sites/default/files/research/2009_NAEP_Reading_Results_0.pdf) (last accessed Aug. 9, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education – Understanding High School Graduation Rates in Connecticut (June 2007).

<sup>34</sup> State of Connecticut Commission on Children, "Child Poverty in Connecticut," March 2008, [http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/poverty/child\\_poverty\\_report\\_0109.pdf](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/poverty/child_poverty_report_0109.pdf) (last accessed Aug. 9, 2010).

income children. After dropping out of high school, many young people then drift to the margins of our society. In many instances, this leads to trouble with the law.

### **III. Summary of the Briefing**

Graduation rates in the nation's high schools are a focus of concern for educators and policymakers. Statistics show that three in ten students fail to finish high school with a diploma; sometimes less than half of historically disadvantaged minority students graduate. This trend is at a crisis level and has been called "The Silent Epidemic."<sup>35</sup> To discuss this crisis, the Advisory Committee invited 15 people, including elected officials, government officials, school administrators, teachers, education specialists, and community advocates to make presentations.

The Advisory Committee briefing began with an overview of the intersection of Connecticut's public education system and civil rights. Offering perspectives were Deputy Commissioner of Education George Coleman, State Representative Gary Holder-Winfield, Assistant Professor at the Neag School of Education Jason Irizarry, and former Commissioner of Education Betty Sternberg.

The second panel of experts, comprised of Hartford Public Schools Superintendent Steven Adamowski, Hamden High School Principal Gary Highsmith, and Connecticut Center for School Change Executive Director Andrew Lachman, focused on system supports that encourage effective school administration and their impact on student achievement.

The third panel included a discussion of the recent advances of student-tracking and measurement mechanisms, which were discussed by Sarah Ellsworth, Chief of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation for Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE), and Alex Johnston, Chief Executive Officer of ConnCAN. Both discussed the significance of the numbers for student attainment and the need for additional measures. Although the improvements to student measures are significant, more accurate and varied measures and indices would allow for more meaningful analysis of teacher performance and student progress.

The fourth panel explored the effect of the home environment on student attainment. Vincent Siberon, Executive Director of ASPIRA of Connecticut, Danielle Smith, State Director of Black Alliance for Educational Options, and Martha Stone, Executive Director of Center for Children's Advocacy, discussed educating students in disadvantaged communities.

The briefing concluded with State Representative Jason Bartlett, Queens College Professor Clive Belfield, and Capital Preparatory Magnet School Principal Steve Perry, who discussed the real-life consequences when children in Connecticut do not receive the quality education that should be provided by the public high school system.

A summary of each panelist's presentation is provided in the Appendix.

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<sup>35</sup> John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Jr., and Karen Burke Morison, "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," <http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf> (last accessed Aug. 16, 2010).

#### **IV. Recent Developments**

The Advisory Committee convened its briefing on graduation rate disparities in April 2010. Subsequently, in May, as the concern about lagging student performance in Connecticut's schools increased, and in an attempt to secure additional education resources available from the Race-to-the-Top program, the Connecticut General Assembly combined several bills that had made their way through the Education Committee into an omnibus bill. This bill, Substitute Senate Bill No. 438, "An Act Concerning Education Reform in Connecticut," makes substantial changes to state education laws, policies and practices in an effort to strengthen standards for students, increase accountability for teachers and administrators, and provide a more significant role for parents and community leaders in the operation of low-achieving schools.

The bill makes numerous changes to state education laws, including:

1. setting higher minimum standards to receive a high school diploma by increasing "minimum credits" necessary to graduate from 20 to 25, starting with the graduating class of 2018;
2. giving the SDE the power to reconstitute a local school or regional board of education, after being designated as low-achieving, following two consecutive years of failure to make adequate progress;
3. requiring the SDE to develop, by July 1, 2013, guidelines for teacher evaluations that include student academic growth, and requiring every school district to incorporate student academic growth into the teacher evaluation process by this date;
4. requiring the SBE to expand the "public school information system" by July 1, 2013, to track and report to school boards data on performance growth by students, teachers, schools, and school districts;
5. permitting the school board of a priority school district to convert an existing school or establish a new school as an "innovation school" that allows the school greater autonomy and flexibility in curriculum, budget, school schedule, and other policies;
6. requiring school boards with low-achieving schools to create "school governance councils" made up of parents (or guardians), teachers, administrators, students, and community leaders to advise the principal on the school budget, interview candidates to fill major vacancies, etc;
7. modifying charter school laws to improve their standing and capacity; and
8. revising state certification laws for administrators and superintendents, potentially expanding opportunities for the Alternative Route to Certification (ARC) program.

The new law, Public Act 10-111, was signed by Governor Rell on May 26, 2010, and went into effect on July 1, 2010. The Advisory Committee's findings and recommendations were subsequently amended to reflect the provisions of the Public Act.

## V. Findings and Recommendations

Both President Obama and former President Bush designate education as the civil rights issue for our time. All parties recognize that a high-quality education determines a person's work life and quality of life, and all educational reforms seek to ensure that every child in America, regardless of race or income, is provided a high-quality education. Many of Connecticut's urban school districts are failing their students. This failure to provide high-quality education has meant that too many Connecticut children, mostly poor and mostly African American and Latino, are denied opportunities to participate fully in our communities.

The Committee's choice to examine disparities in high school graduation rates reflects the importance of a successful high school education for young people. According to a recent report, there is a "high school dropout epidemic" in the United States. Each year, almost one third of all public high school students – and nearly one half of all African-American students – fail to graduate from public high school. The high school dropout problem is a crisis for the United States – dropouts are far more likely to spend their lives unemployed, poor, on government assistance, and/or cycling through the criminal justice system.

Globally, the United States ranks 17th in high school graduation rates. Both presidents have observed that the most valuable skill you can sell in a global economy is your knowledge, making a good education no longer just a pathway to opportunity but, instead, a prerequisite. For young men and women coming of age in this economic environment, graduating from high school is a necessity for further economic and social advancement.

At its briefing, the Advisory Committee heard testimony about the dire consequences of dropping out and possible approaches to reduce these attrition rates in Connecticut's public schools. The Advisory Committee learned that 65 percent of inmates in Connecticut prisons are high school dropouts and that the Connecticut state budget provides three times more funding to the criminal justice system than the public education system. Known as the *school-to-prison pipeline*, the disparity for Connecticut residents is striking – three quarters of the Connecticut prison population is comprised of ethnic minorities. Conversely, three quarters of the Connecticut post-secondary institution population is comprised of whites. The Advisory Committee also heard testimony that the state's school leaders and teachers – the vast majority of whom work tirelessly, are passionate, and go above and beyond the call of duty for their students – are using new strategies to address the achievement gap and the concomitant graduation rate gap. Those who addressed the Committee also described the open-choice program, as well as the various types of schools, such as magnet and charter schools, that have been created in an effort to address the achievement gap.

There are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis. There are, however, approaches to identify and help at-risk students. Dropping out is not a sudden spontaneous act; rather, it is a gradual process of disconnection. To improve the prospect of students staying in schools, the emphasis should be holistic: involving the school, students, and parents; making pedagogy more relevant and engaging; improving the communication between parents and teachers/leaders; making a strong connection between the student and his/her teacher or school administrator; and improving access to supports for struggling students. In the end, the Committee identified seven

areas that must be addressed to reduce the achievement gap and help assure success for all students:

- School Culture
- School Leadership
- Teacher Evaluation
- Teacher Retention
- Parental Involvement
- Data Collection
- English Language Learners

The Advisory Committee also has concerns that underperforming students are encouraged to take the General Educational Development (GED) test to obtain a GED rather than a diploma. This practice is detrimental to the future success of the student. It is the duty of school teachers and administrators to make clear to students and parents that the GED is not an equal alternative to the attainment of a high school diploma. Employment as well as future educational opportunities are diminished even more for those holding a GED. Moreover, offering the GED as an alternative fails to adequately address the achievement gap issue.

Based on the record created at the briefing, the Connecticut State Advisory Committee makes the following recommendations.

**Finding 1: Create a Supportive, Engaging and Rigorous School Culture**

Highly successful high schools create school environments that encompass rigor, relevance, and relationships. The development and implementation of rigorous content standards, coupled with relevant instruction that contains real-world applicability, are essential in providing access for all students to reach high levels of achievement. In addition, a key element of creating a district and school culture of high performance is building and sustaining strong relationships between teachers and students. When rigor, relevance, and relationships are in place and reach all students, improvement initiatives are brought to scale and achievement increases for all students.

**Recommendation 1.1**

Local school districts and the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) should ensure that curricular pathways to success are established through a rigorous, college-ready program of study for all students. To ensure all students have access to these pathways, the curriculum, instruction, and assessment must reflect a college-ready approach.

**Recommendation 1.2**

The Connecticut SDE should explore ways in which assessments can incorporate not only rigorous content standards aligned with the recently adopted Common Core standards, but also assess the core competencies required for all students to acquire college-ready knowledge and skills for success in our global society.

**Recommendation 1.3**

The Connecticut SDE should identify exemplar programs to share with local school districts that cultivate a strong district and school culture of belonging through mentoring, extracurricular

programming, leadership opportunities, college awareness programming and supportive, highly engaging classrooms environments.

### **Finding 2: School Leadership**

As with quality teachers, high-quality school and district leadership is key to ensuring students are college-ready upon graduation from high school.

#### **Recommendation 2.1**

The Connecticut SDE should explore exemplary leadership preparation programs from across the nation to ensure certification requirements and educational leadership programming are structured to prepare fully pre-service administrators for positions of leadership. Administrative certification requirements should include meaningful internships and coursework that align to the critical needs of leading schools in Connecticut.

#### **Recommendation 2.2**

There is significant research identifying what constitutes effective school leadership. The Wallace Foundation recently released a research study that outlines key indicators of effective school leadership. In Connecticut, the Common Core of Leading was revised in 2009, and can serve as a guide to local school districts in the development of comprehensive administrative evaluation plans. These plans provide frequent feedback, coaching, and support to administrators on their leadership practice. The plans should clearly outline remediation for those who are not meeting the expectations of the administrative evaluation plan.

#### **Recommendation 2.3**

School districts should create support structures for school leaders that provide coaching, feedback, and training according to the Common Core of Leading. These plans should be comprehensive in design and shared among school districts. The Connecticut SDE should highlight exemplary plans and practices to enable a sharing of best practices among school districts.

#### **Recommendation 2.4**

Leadership networks, such as the Superintendent's Network through the Center for School Change, serve to promote transparency in leadership practices and provide opportunities for district leaders to share practices and learn from experts in the field of education. The Connecticut SDE should explore ways in which to promote these networks so that leadership practices between and among suburban and urban school districts are less isolating and more collaborative.

### **Finding 3: Teacher Evaluation**

Access to high-quality teachers remains a crucial component of academic success. Quality instruction delivered by competent, motivated teachers invested in their students' success is key to high school graduation as well as future success in college, careers, and citizenship. Placing high-quality teachers in underperforming schools and school districts can improve high school attainment rates. Identifying high-quality teachers must involve a rigorous and fair process of evaluating teacher performance on an ongoing basis. The Connecticut SDE and state school

districts, however, do not currently collect sufficient information to adequately measure individual teacher performance.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Advisory Committee recommends that the Education Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, the creation of which is mandated by Public Act 10-111, consider the following when developing guidelines that incorporate student achievement growth into the teacher evaluation process:

- a) The degree to which teacher evaluation should include frequent classroom observations and feedback by other teachers. This might also include a specially-dedicated, Connecticut-wide team of teaching quality control observers made up of retired teachers, a majority of whom should be award-winning teachers;
- b) How teacher evaluation could draw from the statewide longitudinal data system (PSIS) and include student achievement growth indicators as a significant part of the evaluation process;
- c) Whether teacher evaluation should include an element of consultation with, and feedback from, students and parents;
- d) How teacher evaluation is connected to the process of teacher training and professional development;
- e) How teacher evaluation is connected to a system of performance-related pay; and
- f) When teacher retention decisions are made during an economic recession, consideration should be given to the quality of teachers, and not simply carried out on a seniority basis.

### **Finding 4: Teacher Retention**

A strong correlation exists between access to high-quality teachers and academic success for students. Numerous studies have documented the positive effect quality teachers can have on the scholastic achievement of students from economically disadvantaged areas. In fact, highly-skilled teachers can raise the achievement of students living in low-income communities. In low-income school districts, however, school administrators often struggle to retain quality teachers who frequently either leave the profession or relocate to a more affluent school district after a few years of teaching. This exodus of teaching talent constitutes a significant impediment towards closing the achievement gap among Connecticut schoolchildren. Multiple studies have identified causal factors in the failure of low-income school districts to retain teachers: lower salaries compared to more affluent districts, a lack of control over the curriculum, a lack of support from the school administration, and student discipline issues.

Various experts have proposed remedies to the lack of teacher retention in economically-disadvantaged school districts that focus on fostering mentoring relationships between experienced teachers and those beginning their careers. In Connecticut, the state legislature established the Beginner Educator Support and Training (BEST) program in 1989, which required that Connecticut public school teachers, during their first two years of teaching, be mentored by veteran teachers, who would assess their protégé's progress. New teachers were required to complete the program to maintain their teaching licenses. The legislature terminated



BEST in 2009 and established the Teacher Educating and Mentoring Program (TEAM) as a replacement. Under TEAM, teacher mentoring occurs under a “professional growth module” plan, with teachers of primary subjects required to complete five module courses, and non-primary course teachers required to complete two.

#### **Recommendation 4.1**

Due to the strong correlation between the retention of high-quality teachers and student achievement in low-income school districts, the Connecticut SDE and school districts should examine fresh and innovative approaches to teacher retention. The goal of such efforts should be, clearly, to retain the best teachers in economically-disadvantaged school districts.

Included in any new approach toward teacher retention should be an examination of whether the creation of financial incentives would improve retention rates in urban school districts. For example, the Committee suggests considering an early retirement incentive for those teachers who commit to work in a troubled school for a specified period of time. Incentives such as higher salaries or generous retirement plans may help retain teachers and, as their numbers increase, other high-quality teachers will join them, thus improving the support systems for these teachers.

Teacher retention efforts, however, cannot be limited to merely creating incentives for teachers to stay in low-income school districts. When examining which teachers a school district may wish to retain, consideration should be focused upon which teachers possess the greatest skill level and not who has the most seniority.

#### **Recommendation 4.2**

Studies have demonstrated that meaningful mentoring relationships between new and experienced teachers can be crucial toward teacher development. Teachers with productive mentoring relationships are better able to acquire the skills necessary to succeed in a challenging classroom environment. The inability of many low-income school districts to foster successful mentoring relationships is considered a factor in their low teacher retention rates. Accordingly, school districts with lower teacher retention rates should examine ways in which to produce more substantive teacher relationships.

Under TEAM, guidelines have been established detailing the mentoring relationship between new and experienced teachers. These guidelines focus primarily upon requirements each party must satisfy – for example, how many hours of guidance must be provided per module, and skills new teachers must demonstrate during the mentoring relationship to complete the program. The Committee believes that the Connecticut legislature, as well as school districts, should also examine ways in which the mentoring relationship can help identify and alleviate the problems previously referenced as often causing teachers to leave low-income school districts.

#### **Finding 5: Parental Involvement**

A correlation exists between parental involvement in a child’s education and scholastic success. Educators agree that, when parents take an active role in their children’s education, students are more likely to have higher grades, better school attendance, and fewer instances of behavioral problems. Parents’ involvement in their children’s education may be multi-faceted, including influencing school governance, having direct communications with teachers and administrators,

and encouraging educational pursuits at home. Parents and educators working together in this type of partnership help foster an environment conducive to student growth and success.

**Recommendation 5.1**

The Connecticut SDE should consider approaches to facilitating parental involvement in school governance structures, such as advisory councils and boards of governance.

**Recommendation 5.2**

Because parental participation is critical to successful student outcomes, local school districts must explore strategies that will accommodate demanding parental work schedules and at the same time create strong partnerships between homes and schools. Such partnerships should require that parents volunteer to perform tasks for the school, as needed. This practice of parental participation is readily recognized as parental sweat equity. School officials should establish flexible approaches that afford parents with even the most demanding work schedules the opportunity to perform tasks for the school. For example, some parents could complete their volunteer hours by doing take-home projects outside the classroom. This creates a culture of strong parent-family participation and promotes the life of the school as an important part of being successful.

**Recommendation 5.3**

Teachers and administrators should clearly communicate their expectations to parents and students and should encourage open lines of communication with parents. This communication should be clear on how the child is performing relative to those expectations.

**Recommendation 5.4**

Parents should be actively encouraged to participate at home in their children’s growth toward proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics.

**Finding 6: Data Collection**

The Connecticut SDE has made significant progress toward improving its mechanisms for measuring high school graduation rates, notably in adopting the National Governors’ Association Compact and implementing a longitudinal data system and a unique student identifier. The current system still relies on school districts self-reporting and inputting data, and there remains a significant potential financial disincentive for school districts to minimize the number of high school students dropping out during the course of a school year because the state’s funding formula for school districts is based only on enrollment counts at the beginning of each school year.

**Recommendation 6.1**

The Connecticut SDE should enhance its measures to exercise quality control on the data it receives from school districts and ensure that data is provided consistently across districts.

**Recommendation 6.2**

Schools should be required to provide the results of the data collection not only to the Connecticut SDE, but to parents/guardians of district schoolchildren as well. The data provided to the SDE and parents/guardians should include high school and district-wide graduation and

dropout rates. Additional information should also be provided concerning how the high school and district-wide graduation and dropout rates compare to the statewide average graduation and dropout rates.

### **Finding 7: English Language Learners**

English Language Learners (ELL) represent a large and growing part of Connecticut's student population. 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. Presently, Connecticut does not have a statewide, comprehensive policy to address the unique needs of ELL students.

#### **Recommendation 7.1**

The legislature, Connecticut SDE, and school districts should take steps to ensure that Connecticut teachers are adequately prepared to teach ELL students. Among such measures should be the hiring of more ELL teachers. Additionally, current Connecticut teacher certification policies, which make the hiring of otherwise qualified ELL teachers from other states difficult, should be altered to enable the hiring of more ELL teachers.

#### **Recommendation 7.2**

School districts should examine whether changes in the structure of the school day may assist ELL students. More specifically, districts should explore ways in which additional learning time could be provided for ELL students. Additionally, districts should develop approaches that allow ELL students to keep pace with their non-ELL peers while acquiring their English skills.

#### **Recommendation 7.3**

The acquisition of English by ELL students does not take place only during the school day. To maximize ELL students' constructive exposure to English, districts should coordinate their ELL programs with community after-school programs.

#### **Recommendation 7.4**

School districts should inform public policymakers regarding the need for critical programs and policies.

### **Finding 8: General Educational Development**

Since 1971, Connecticut has issued over 140,000 high school diplomas through the successful completion of the General Educational Development (GED) test. The GED, however, is not a substitute for a regular high school diploma. Research shows that individuals with GEDs perform in the U.S. labor market at the same level as high school dropouts and many employers consider the GED inferior to a diploma. Ironically, the U.S. Armed Services, which helped create the GED in 1947, now maintains a tight ceiling on the number of GED recruits: one branch restricts GED-holder recruits to one percent.

#### **Recommendation 8**

School districts should emphasize to students that failing to graduate from high school leaves them with fewer opportunities later in life, and that the completion of the GED program does not

serve as a substitute for a high school diploma. Moreover, the State should ensure that GED completion and high school graduation are not treated as equivalent when reporting longitudinal data on student outcomes.

## APPENDIX

The Advisory Committee invited 15 experts, including elected officials, government officials, school administrators, teachers, education specialists, and community advocates to make presentations. Invited speakers included Steven Adamowski, Superintendent for Hartford Public Schools; State Representative Jason Bartlett; George Coleman, Deputy Commissioner of Education; Sarah Ellsworth, Chief of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation for Connecticut State Department of Education; Gary Highsmith, Principal of Hamden High School; State Representative Gary Holder-Winfield; Jason Irizarry, Assistant Professor at the Neag School of Education; Alex Johnston, Chief Executive Officer of ConnCAN; Andrew Lachman, the Executive Director of the Connecticut Center for School Change; Vincent Siberon, Executive Director of ASPIRA of Connecticut; Danielle Smith, State Director of Black Alliance for Educational Options; Betty Sternberg, former Commissioner of Education; and Martha Stone, Executive Director of Center for Children's Advocacy.

A summary of each panelist is presented below:

### *Panel One: The Context of Disparities in High School Attainment*

#### George Coleman, Deputy Commissioner of Education

Dr. Coleman recognized the deleterious effects of low academic achievement in Connecticut while presenting the Connecticut State Department of Education's efforts to correct and discourage the trend. High school dropouts represent an underdeveloped educational group that coalesces into personal and social stagnation. Moreover, failure to attain high school level education has lifelong consequences on an individual's family relations, earning power, and civic participation. The Connecticut State Department of Education has advanced proposals to delay the age at which a student may drop out of high school with a parent's permission. The Department seeks to raise standards and to require school implementation of stronger student and parent supports to enable achievement of the higher standards that will grow to include global market skills such as world languages and high-order mathematics. Also, the Department intends to use "Race to the Top" grants toward programs that combat high school dropouts.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Coleman indicated a desire for broader dialogue among invested parties throughout Connecticut to elevate the dire issue of educational attainment.

#### Gary Holder-Winfield, State Representative

Mr. Holder-Winfield began his testimony to the State Advisory Committee by remarking on the central emphasis of education vis-à-vis denied civil rights. Although Mr. Holder-Winfield acknowledged the importance of the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and racial integration in educational settings, he saw as misguided efforts to racially integrate failing schools. He asserted the need for public education officials to identify and replicate successful schools regardless of the schools' level of racial integration. Mr. Holder-Winfield proposed that the issue of high school attainment must be discussed in a real-world, modern civil rights perspective that acknowledges the sometimes-fatal effects of high school dropout rates. He

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<sup>1</sup> After the briefing adjourned, Connecticut was not ultimately awarded Race to the Top funds.

firmly informed the Committee that dropouts not only fail to achieve adequate educational standards, but also are often “dead in the streets of Connecticut.” To this point, Mr. Holder-Winfield cited a number of murders in Hartford, Connecticut, that occurred in the first quarter of 2010; high school dropouts comprised 100 percent of these criminal incidents’ victims. With these dire consequences, Mr. Holder-Winfield emphasized the critical importance of collaboration among educators and consumers of the educational system. He illustrated the adversarial, victim-blaming perspective of the present interpersonal dynamics of parent/student-educator communication and relationships. Mr. Holder-Winfield cited a bill put forth by the State Legislature’s Black and Puerto Rican Caucus that aims to enact a collaborative model to empower parents, educators, and community advocates to cooperatively intervene in failing schools. He described tremendous parent enthusiasm and support for this bill as a novel and significant development and signal of hope for efforts to reform Connecticut’s educational system.

Jason Irizarry, Assistant Professor, Neag School of Education

Dr. Irizarry centered his presentation upon the exploration of the student experience within the present educational environment in Connecticut’s urban schools as demonstrated through institutional and student research. He largely relied upon data and experience gathered from his Project FUERTE – Future Urban Educators conducting Research to Transform Education, a participatory research and ethnographic study through which students critically examine education and schools and provide recommendations to improve the educational experience. Dr. Irizarry questioned popular conceptions of “dropouts” which absolve educators from responsibility for students’ education. He illustrated that schools do not affirm the cultural identity of urban students, citing Project FUERTE participants’ collection of educators’ discriminatory and degrading comments directed at ethnic minority students. He also noted the absence of relatable material for students in urban schools. One urban Connecticut school, in which Latino students are 50 percent of the student population, offers only one required-reading novel in which a Latino is the protagonist and/or author. Further, schools mandate English-only speech, providing disciplinary action for a student’s use of non-standard English variations and foreign languages. Dr. Irizarry used these examples to demonstrate a disconnection between the educational environment and the student’s cultural identity. This disconnection depersonalizes the educational experience, resulting in student disengagement, non-participation, and negative impression of education. Moreover, these practices become internalized and affirm a perceived intellectual inferiority among cultural minorities.

Of particular interest and importance to Project FUERTE students is the so-called school-to-prison pipeline. Dr. Irizarry explained the demographic representation of Connecticut residents, post-secondary education participants, and incarcerated Connecticut residents to illustrate the inverted relationship of educational participation and criminal justice participation: three quarters of Connecticut prison population is comprised of ethnic minorities and three quarters of Connecticut post-secondary institution population is comprised of whites. Notably, 65 percent of inmates are high school dropouts, while the Connecticut state budget affords three times more funding to the criminal justice system than the public education system. Dr. Irizarry noted that students who experience cultural identity affirmation in the educational setting would demonstrate increased investment and participation in education. Thus, the concentration of disparity between dominant and minority ethnicities will decrease and interrupt the school-to-

prison pipeline. Dr. Irizarry contended that the dropout rates and disparity will diminish and students will seek engagement and success if high-quality, affirmative educational environments are made accessible to them.

Betty Sternberg, Former Commissioner of Education

At the opening of her testimony to the State Advisory Committee, Dr. Sternberg relayed a personal anecdote of childhood professional expectations that illustrated the relevance of a personally intimate vision of achievement. Through her story, Dr. Sternberg suggested that the invisibility of academic success in urban, impoverished communities contributes to the perpetuation of academic underachievement by these communities. She asserted that the core academic principles of personalization, real-world connections, and a common intellectual mission, first popularized by California educator Larry Rosenstock, must be incorporated in Connecticut's academic paradigm to improve student achievement in underperforming schools. Dr. Sternberg referred to the work of former Principal Kathleen Greider at Dwight Elementary School, which included school-sponsored tours of nearby post-secondary educational institutions and building decorations stating encouragements such as "Class of 2016!" She explained that these experiential and environmental cues lead students to create personal identity and self-concepts that include academic achievement. Such identity formation may likely be quite contrary to a student's previous vision of self and greater community. However, making education amenable to a student's personal and community identity is only the first step; academic material must be truly personalized in content according to a student's interest and ability. Dr. Sternberg referred to the Met School of Providence, Rhode Island, where the ideas and passions of a student drive the formation of a unique, personal curriculum, leading to what is referred to as "one student accountability," wherein education is accountable to every individual student. Yet, beyond personal connection to the academic material, there must exist a connection between the academic material and the "real world."

Dr. Sternberg stressed the fundamental purpose of education as student capacity-building to build the future's competitive and capable workforce. Dr. Sternberg stressed the relevance of interdisciplinary study, where academic subjects are presented as they truly exist in the world. The exploration of academic subjects in an interrelated manner cultivates high-demand skills and abilities such as information synthesis, higher order thinking, problem-solving, and questioning. She further advanced that these outcomes, though highly valued in industry, do not perfectly align with educational goals as dictated by current Connecticut State Department of Education policy. In a similar vein, Dr. Sternberg addressed the so-called phenomenon of "teaching to the test," which places outcomes above the student attainment and thereby subverts a more holistic education. She further described how standardized achievement tests utilize outdated technologies, illustrating the need to ally education to modern professional skill sets. Dr. Sternberg's testimony clearly stated that Connecticut's current educational policy mitigates against a successful education; yet, successful education reform can happen in Connecticut's failing schools if these principles are integrated into policies that support educators' efforts to engage students in personally and professionally relevant educational experiences.

*Panel Two: Examining Structures and Systems*

Steven Adamowski, Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools

Dr. Adamowski presented the “Three Rs” of successful educational settings that must be integrated into Connecticut high schools to improve educational attainment and graduation rates:

*Rigor:* High schools should prepare all students for competitive global markets with a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum. He explained that all students must attain high educational standards because of the very slim non-service sector employment opportunities within the current American economy: 12 percent of the American population is employed in manufacturing, only 3 percent is in agriculture. Although not all students pursue post-secondary education, skills derived from a college-preparatory curriculum better prepare students for the national and global competitive, service-based economy.

*Relevance:* This aspect of urban high schools offers individual choice to students to select personally relevant and interesting topics; as a result, students are better able to engage with the material and thereby experience the empowerment of academic success. Hartford, as the only school district to adopt the Commissioner of Education’s proposal for reform, has created themed high schools that require five of 25 credits to be directed toward research or employment in the subject theme area.

*Relationships:* Intimate educational settings increase the student sense of accountability, responsibility, and engagement. Newly-established Hartford high schools decrease classroom size in order to increase the experience of personal relationships among and across students and educators.

Gary Highsmith, Principal, Hamden High School

Mr. Highsmith proposed that the issue of high school dropout rates may be resolved through addressing the educational transition from middle school to high school. According to Mr. Highsmith, most high school dropouts occur after the first year. The National High School Center reports that 4.2 million ninth graders matriculated in 2003, but only 3.75 million returned to school the following year. Forty percent of ninth graders repeat the ninth grade. Of those, only 20 graduate to the 10th grade. Much of the high school structure and parental involvement in high school fosters independence and isolation. The harsh transition from middle school to high school impacts a student’s core beliefs and values, thus affecting a student’s sense of self-worth and determination. Also, parents tend to allow high school students, and especially freshmen, greater personal discretion and space. Mr. Highsmith asserts that the middle school to high school transition requires a parent’s careful attention to the student and his/her activities, i.e., social choices, multimedia time and use, test preparation, and homework completion. Though schools must adopt greater accountability to freshmen in school, parents must practice greater supervision of a student’s extracurricular lifestyle and education. Mr. Highsmith emphasized that cultural and structural changes to high school education must parallel or follow changes to parental responsibility and behavior.

Highsmith demonstrated this argument with a description of his Hamden High School’s freshmen alternative placement program for at-risk students, or “Team H.” Students may be



referred according to teacher referral, disciplinary referral, suspension record, low standardized test scores, low attendance record, and/or high frequency in “D” and “F” grades. This program offers cultural and structural changes to the freshman experience. One school administrator is assigned to the freshman class only. Two school counselors are assigned to the freshman class and become transitional experts. Freshman-only study halls are established, and writing and mathematics labs are open to freshmen during these periods. A freshman-assigned social worker offers twice-weekly seminars in “soft skills” of high school success. All students have access to the same pyramid of supports despite being assigned to different teachers. Team teaching is prevalent, freshman movement about the school is restricted and freshmen are organized into smaller classrooms. To bolster positive parental impact, Hamden High School offers workshops to freshman parents on adolescent development, evidence-based parenting practices, and social networking.

Data exists supporting the effectiveness of these programs. In the 2003/2004 academic year, less than 10 percent of the 70 Team H students failed to graduate to 10th grade. In the 2009-2010 academic year, 95 percent of Team H participants are projected to graduate to 10th grade. Mr. Highsmith emphasized the need to develop freshman transition programs, the results of which should be reported to the Connecticut SDE in addition to the report of freshman dropouts. Mr. Highsmith also recommended development of legislation to formalize and mandate parent responsibility for high school student education.

Andrew Lachman, Executive Director, Connecticut Center for School Change

The Connecticut Center for School Change works with public school districts within Connecticut to “develop the capacity of their professionals as better instructional and organizational leaders.” Dr. Lachman identified five ways in which the effectiveness of schools can be increased:

*Focus on the instructional core.* Student engagement in, and teacher knowledge of, a rigorous and relevant curriculum is essential to good outcomes. Changes in school structure, additional time in school, and more money will not make a difference if the instructional core is not improved.

*Invest in people.* Teacher quality is the most important factor in creating good outcomes. Teacher quality should not be measured by certification, academic degrees, or seniority, but should be measured by student progress. Research shows that school principals are key to creating working conditions that lead to the retention of good teachers. On-the-job professional development, through mentoring and coaching, can help teachers to enhance their practice and thereby to improve student performance.

*Think systemically.* Focus on improving districts rather than on individual schools. A narrow focus can mask the reality that progress is not being made in every school across the state. It is important to move beyond the notion of “islands of excellence” and to guarantee every student a high-quality high school experience. This will require creating sustainable systems with depth, so that everyone within the system is committed to improving outcomes, and with breadth, so that the commitment is made in every classroom in every school.

*Think strategically.* Develop a theory of action: if strategy A is pursued, then one expects outcome B. Program coherence leads to better outcomes. This can be accomplished through professional development, increasing accountability, and improving human resources. Actions in the central office should affect outcomes in the classroom.

*Think politically.* It takes political will to change the system. Changes should improve the system and not be made merely for the sake of change.

### *Panel Three: Measuring High School Graduation and Dropout Rates*

#### Sarah Ellsworth, Connecticut State Department of Education

Ms. Ellsworth offered a brief history of the graduation rate calculation to demonstrate both the improvement of graduation calculation and the need to further develop these calculations. The Connecticut State Department of Education previously employed a non-cohort-based calculation that relied upon the division of senior year graduates by the sum of the graduates and dropouts from the academic year cohort. This derived calculation resulted in the loss of individual-level student data and precluded detailed subgroup analyses. Significant changes in data collection have improved the accuracy and quality of calculation. The launch of the Public School Information System (PSIS) in 2002 began the thrice-yearly collection of student-level demographic and program data. Since 2005, pre-kindergarten through high school senior students have carried unique student identifiers that persist through the student's high school graduation/dropout. At the same time, data systems began to track the cause for a student's exit from a school district, i.e., relocation, dropout, transfer. These systems enable the linkage of students' primary demographic data to disciplinary offenses, attendance records, and standardized test results. Also, the systems allow accurate graduation calculation through the individual tracking of each student through their high school career; this measurement is adjusted for transferred students. Unique student identifiers confirm a student's inter-district transfer and enrollment in adult education and General Educational Development (GED) programs. Ms. Ellsworth reported that plans to further improve student tracking are under development. Grant funding from the "America Competes Act" will link student performance to individual teachers. Also, the Connecticut State Department of Education is attempting to contract with the National Student Clearinghouse so that Connecticut students will be tracked for post-secondary education attainment. In addition to the State's recent, significant improvements to student tracking and graduation rate calculation, these developments will improve analyses to strengthen public education outcomes and to identify best practices.

#### Alex Johnston, Chief Executive Officer, ConnCAN

Mr. Johnston's testimony to the Advisory Committee explored the educational reform example in New Haven, Connecticut. New Haven's aggressive school reform plan requires the school district to collaborate with the Connecticut State Department of Education and the P-20 Council to build a longitudinal data system with numerous indicators to determine the district's true educational needs, as well as to allow rigorous empirical analysis. New Haven's educational goal is more ambitious than improving graduation rates, as evidenced by a variety of district-wide interventions. New Haven considers student learning and growth as the ultimate objective in every educational decision. Student growth, as determined by academic progress per academic year, will be based upon initial ability and used to create a trajectory of student achievement.

This offers the opportunity to provide student-specific supports in deficit areas to enable the student to reach universal academic standards. To this end, the New Haven district will contribute information to the data systems that includes measures of academic scores, student engagement, teacher engagement, course work, and demonstrated skills. Also, the district seeks to enable a data system to track student achievement beyond graduation through post-secondary degree attainment, because the economic incentive for education only exists beyond the high school diploma.

*Panel Four: The Family and Community Context*

Vincent Siberon, Executive Director, ASPIRA of Connecticut

Mr. Siberon illustrated the Latino socioeconomic and educational experience through a number of statistics: 50 percent of Latino students attend high-poverty concentration schools that receive \$1,000 less than suburban schools per student. Latinos are twice as likely to live in poverty than whites; 70 percent of Latino households are headed by single women; for the past 10 years, Latino students have trailed whites in language, mathematics, and reading assessments. Twenty percent of kindergarten to high school senior students are Latino; 11 percent of college students are Latino, and 51 percent of these students drop out of college. Sixty percent of 16- to 19-year-old students with poor language skills drop out of high school, and 8 percent of English Language Learners are Latino. In 2009, between 41 and 46 percent of Latino high school students dropped out of Connecticut high schools. Mr. Siberon asserted that rote, lecture-based education must be reformed to increase student engagement. Mr. Siberon asserted that emphasis on skill attainment in critical thinking, reading, writing, and mathematics must be prioritized above standardized assessment. Also, he claimed that parents must be educated to improve parental ability and involvement in extracurricular learning.

Danielle K. Smith, State Director, Black Alliance for Educational Options

Ms. Smith provided a detailed explanation of the need for parental empowerment to elicit effective school change for children of poor and working-class families. Ms. Smith asserted that Connecticut demonstrates abundant examples of high-quality educational options for impoverished, urban communities. Parent education, advocacy skill building, community organization, and political mobilization may converge to invigorate the process of increasing high-quality educational options. Ms. Smith demonstrated that educators and parents might create opportunity for mutual accountability and trust. She exemplified this point through Campaign LEARN (Leadership in Education Achievement Reform Now) through which parents, community members, and education officials engage in forums, which explore parent and student experience within the school system and offer constructive feedback for positive change. She described the good faith effort made by educators to collaborate with parents at places, dates, and times conducive to meaningful parental engagement. This promotes parental participation and a collaborative and inclusive experience for parents who may otherwise feel alienated and discouraged from their children's schools. Community organizations may augment this process through advocacy, support, and protection for parental involvement and empowerment.

Martha Stone, Executive Director, Center for Children's Advocacy

Ms. Stone appeared before the State Advisory Committee equipped with a four-point recommendation set formulated to increase student achievement vis-à-vis decreased racial and ethnic isolation and poverty concentration in schools. Ms. Stone explained that there is a correlation between increased student achievement and reduced-isolation settings as indicated in a 2007 Harvard University study of the Open Choice Program and the Early Beginnings Program in Hartford as well as a University of Connecticut Neag School of Education study of magnet schools in the state. These studies demonstrate that Hartford students in reduced-isolation settings exhibit significant language attainment and outperform their racially and ethnically isolated peers. Her first recommendation was to increase seat availability in reduced-isolation settings for Hartford students. She also described the enthusiastic demand for the Open Choice Program and the insufficient supply of student capacity in reduced-isolation settings; for example, 2,418 Hartford students enrolled in the 2010 Open Choice lottery, yet neighboring reduced-isolation schools have voluntarily extended only 126 seats for these students. Ms. Stone also suggested a stepped incentive approach through which a school district would receive incrementally increased monetary rewards for increased seat availability for Hartford students seeking reduced-isolation settings.

As her second recommendation is to increase seat availability, Ms. Stone advised that the State Commissioner of Education should be granted the authority to mandate suburban school participation in the Open Choice Program. Her second recommendation was to expand magnet school options and to increase funding for successfully integrated schools with attractive themes for suburban students. Ms. Stone referred to a University of Connecticut Center for Education Policy Analysis study that found that magnet schools increase positive academic achievement and attitudes, though secondary magnet schools showed reading and math attainment improvement and primary magnet schools only delivered reading improvement. The study concluded that the achievement difference lies in the degree to which the school setting reduced racial effects compared to the home setting of racial and ethnic isolation.

Ms. Stone's third recommendation offered that charter schools be integrated into the *Sheff v. O'Neill* solution. She explained that charter schools have been proven to increase the academic achievement of urban, impoverished students; yet, only one reduced-isolation charter school exists in the *Sheff* region. Ms. Stone stated that the lean economic conditions in Connecticut require this development to be mandated rather than voluntary.

Finally, Ms. Stone broadened her prescription to implement a plan of regionalization for education. She insisted that the achievement gap, as a function of racial and ethnic isolation and poverty concentration, would continue as long as cities and towns manage education with relative autonomy. Ms. Stone echoed former Connecticut Supreme Court Chief Justice Peters' assertion that the state's districting statute will remain the most significant obstacle to reducing ethnic and racial isolation. She promoted that education should be regionalized, just as Connecticut cities and towns seek to regionalize other essential services and products amidst present economic strains, i.e., water, law enforcement, and emergency response personnel. With these four recommendations, Ms. Stone provided evidence-based educational practices and financial and political impetuses to increase academic attainment aligned with the *Sheff* solution.

*Panel Five: Looking to the Future*

Representative Jason Bartlett

Representative Bartlett's testimony described his efforts within the Connecticut Legislature to produce change for the better in Connecticut student dropout rates. Working with the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, he introduced a bill that raised the age of dropouts with parental permission from 16 to 18 years old (a compromise occurred in which this restriction was lowered to 17 years old), required the production of a uniform dropout slip, and required a pre-dropout student interview with a school administrator. Also, the bill increased the timeframe during which a student may return to school after dropping out from 3 to 10 school days. The bill also requires opportunity for online credit recovery for failing students and presence of Advanced Placement courses in all schools, as these are known to be strong predictors for graduation and school success. Representative Bartlett also presented a long-term perspective on the cost of high dropout rates, which considers not only the saved expense of student education, but also the future public cost of high school dropouts, such as incarceration. School district budgets depend on a number of students to drop out and would run deficits if all initially-enrolled students pursued their high school careers to the fullest degree. Representative Bartlett reflected upon the stubborn response of school districts and officials to school failure, indicating his view that most officials continually refuse to acknowledge this unpalatable truth. Realizing the limitations of a top-down approach, Representative Bartlett emphasized the importance of a bottom-up approach through the establishment of school governing councils. Through these councils, parents, community members, *ex officio* administrators, and teachers may intervene in failing schools to create parent involvement plans and school compacts and influence budgetary decisions. If a school continues to fail for three years, the council may trigger a school reconstitution to one of many school models decided by the Commissioner of Education or the governing council.

Clive Belfield, Professor, Queens College New York

Dr. Belfield offered a detailed accounting of the public economic burden of inadequate education through his analysis of the dropout rate. Nationally, 25 percent of students drop out of high school. The drop-out rate is worse among racial minorities, 35 percent of whom will not complete high school. For minority males, in particular, the drop-out rate stands at 45 percent. This trend will continue as long as poverty increases in our cities. Educational attainment disparities condense in preschool and college settings; kindergarten through high school demonstrates the highest disparity of attainment evidenced by achievement, progression, test scores, grade repetition, and expulsion. Dr. Belfield also explored potential correlations between this outcome and various circumstances. He suggests that the strongest causal force for educational attainment appears to be family income status. Dr. Belfield noted that, at a 30 percent rate of impoverishment, African Americans are twice as likely to live below the poverty line as any other racial group in the United States. Also, one-third of African-American children live in a two-parent household, whereas two-thirds of Latino and white children live in two-parent homes. Dr. Belfield noted that teacher quality, recruitment, and turnover, as well as peer effects, share the blame in educational attainment disparity, although they do not demonstrate the same level of correlation as family income status.

Dr. Belfield enumerated the personal and public burden effects of inadequate educational attainment. A high school dropout earns \$600,000 per lifetime, whereas a high school graduate

earns \$1,000,000 and a college graduate earns \$2,000,000 or more. The public health burden of a high school dropout is remarkable: negative effects of high school dropouts for smoking, obesity, heavy drinking, preventative and maintenance health practices, diet, and exercise exist. On average, high school graduates live five years longer than dropouts. Dropouts demonstrate higher rates of involvement in the criminal justice system, Medicare, housing assistance, cash assistance, food stamps, and welfare systems, all of which carry publicly shared expenses. If a high school dropout were transformed to become a graduate, the public and personal benefit combined would total \$1,000,000 in saved criminal justice and healthcare costs and earned state and federal tax revenues and social benefits.

Dr. Steven Perry, Principal, Capital Preparatory Magnet School, Hartford

Dr. Perry presented a clear message to the Advisory Committee: the trouble of low high school attainment can be solved through increasing student access to and funding for successful high schools. He proposed that the hallmarks of successful schools are self-evident. Such schools have high graduation rates and long waiting lists. Dr. Perry was skeptical of the variety of potential external influences for poor educational attainment, and asserted that education drives social effects (and not vice versa). Students will succeed in schools that interest them and reflect their values. Citing the rates of student involvement in Hartford School Choice Programs and lotteries, Dr. Perry asserted that 11,000 students of 20,000 desire better education: the market must expand to meet the students' needs. Perry was critical of long-term plans for improved educational quality, noting that student lives persist despite district plans to improve education years in the future. He stressed that children in Connecticut need high-quality education and, while there are some schools that provide this, funding needs to be expanded to support and increase effective schools.

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