

**Testimony Supporting S.B. 1099: An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Commission to Develop a Vision and Strategic Plan for the Connecticut Education System**

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Education Committee

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Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee,

My name is Rachel Leventhal-Weiner and I am the Education Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

**I am testifying on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children in support of S.B. 1099: An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Commission to Develop a Vision and Strategic Plan for the Connecticut Education System.** The work of this Commission will be crucial in overcoming persistent barriers to opportunity for so many children in resource-poor communities, children who deserve the same opportunity as their more privileged neighbors.

**As the commission develops a strategic path for Connecticut's public education system that identifies out-of-school factors creating impediments to learning and success in school, we hope it will focus particularly on residential segregation and concentrated poverty.** An overwhelming body of research shows that growing up in segregated communities with high poverty limits students' ability to learn and grow in school.<sup>1</sup> Connecticut Voices for Children's research shows that concentrated poverty and racial segregation of districts is associated with limited access to important school resources like small kindergarten classes and experienced teachers.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, our research shows that towns with greater property wealth are more likely to provide these valuable school resources to students. There is also wide agreement that Connecticut's system of education funding is not directing necessary appropriations to districts in dire need of financial resources, worsening the effects of segregation.<sup>3</sup> Yet the detrimental short-term and long-term consequences of racial and economic isolation of our students too often go unaccounted for in conversations about education reform. The Commission's willingness to address out-of-school factors like the extreme residential segregation in the context of a strategic vision is promising.

**We also encourage the Education Committee to charge the proposed Commission with identifying opportunities for greater synergy between our existing early care and K-12 education systems.** Engagement with education begins even before kindergarten and the establishment of this commission provides an opportunity to unify the state's early care and

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., David Berliner, "Our Impoverished View of Education Reform," *Teachers College Record*. 2006. Available at <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12106>

<sup>2</sup> See Kenneth Feder, Sarah Iverson and Cyd Oppenheimer, J.D. "Unequal Schools: Connecticut's Racial, Socioeconomic, and Geographic Disparities in Kindergarten Class Size and Teaching Experience," *Connecticut Voices for Children*. March, 2015. Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/unequal-schools-connecticuts-racial-socioeconomic-and-geographic-disparities-kindergart>.

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas, Jacqueline Rabe. "CT School Funding Overpays Wealthy Towns, Underpays Needier, Critics Say" *Connecticut Mirror*. March 4, 2015. Available at <http://ctmirror.org/2015/03/04/connecticut-school-funding-plan-overpays-wealthy-towns-underpays-neediest-critics-say/>

education (ECE) and K-12 systems as we begin to imagine a broad system grounded in the provision of equal opportunity for all children. Exposure to high quality early care and education has important short term consequences including cognitive, emotional and behavioral benefits that set young children up for success in their early years of schooling.<sup>4</sup> We encourage the Commission to link together various constituency groups already working to improve educational opportunities from cradle to career including the robust partnership of organizations working on ECE issues state-wide, to ensure better integration of Connecticut’s early care and K-12 education systems.

**Finally, we see an opportunity for the Education Committee to embolden statewide stakeholders to work in tandem with this Commission.** The bill charges the Commission with identifying and analyzing “most significant factors” facing public school children, including but not limited to “poverty, socioeconomic and racial isolation, language barriers, and parental engagement in a student’s education.”<sup>5</sup> Many local and state organizations are deeply engaged in this work already and have made recommendations for improving and equalizing educational opportunity. The timeline for this Commission’s important work stretches out for another two years until potential implementation; as such, we respectfully encourage the Education Committee to work with the State Department of Education to make data used by the Commission available to all education stakeholders, so that external partners conducting research on these topics may help supplement the work of the proposed Commissioner.

**S.B. 1099 is an important turning point for education reform in our state as we pursue answers to both philosophical and pragmatic questions around the future of our public education system. S.B. 1099 takes an important step towards establishing a clear vision for our schools and for schooling with an emphasis on sustainability, equity, and quality for all children regardless of their individual circumstances.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Contact

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<sup>4</sup> See Espinosa, Linda M., “High-Quality Preschool: Why We Need It and What it Looks Like,” National Institute for Early Education Research (November 2002), available at <http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/1.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See SB 1099 <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2015/TOB/S/2015SB-01099-R00-SB.htm>