

Comments from Paul Holzer, Education Director, Achieve Hartford!
May 18, 2010 - Board of Education Regular Meeting

Good Evening Madame Chair, Mayor Perez, Dr. Adamowski, Board Members and all stakeholders of education here tonight. My name is Paul Holzer & I represent Achieve Hartford! at 221 Main St. in downtown Hartford.

I'm speaking briefly tonight on two separate topics: **first**, to offer support for the proposed Betances Early Reading Lab School, and **second**, to highlight the passing of Education bill 431 in the CT state legislature and how one aspect in particular relates to Hartford.

Tonight, you will complete the 2nd reading of the new school design specs for the proposed Betances Early Reading Lab School. In Betances, we have a high needs population with a particularly high ELL population. What better place to build a school that targets resources and focused expertise on reading? The idea here is to enroll students at the Pre-K level and provide them with 5 years worth of intensive reading curricula so that all students read at the proficient level or above by the time they reach 3rd grade. We all know the importance of insuring that students are at least proficient in reading by Grade 3, with research from the National Research Council telling us that "Academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of 3rd grade."¹

1: "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children" is a report of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, National Research Council. It was edited by Catherine E. Snow, M. Susan Burns & Peg Griffin. Copyright 1998 by the National Academy of Sciences

Our schools need to focus on preparing our students in the core skill areas, and they must do so in ways that go well beyond test preparation. This design proposes to do that and more, with a plan to engage parents both within the school and at home, and a plan for intense professional development both for staff, and for parents who must attend a Family Literacy Institute. Achieve Hartford! hopes that in this, its second reading, the design specifications are approved.

On an unrelated topic, Achieve Hartford! last week wrote in our Education Matters! about the passing of Senate Bill 431 – a bill that demonstrates a sense of urgency on the part of our state legislators to close the unacceptable achievement gap in this state. We highlighted one aspect of that legislation, in particular, that exhibits just how much Hartford's reform efforts are being considered best practices.

In recognition of the importance of parent engagement, the legislation included mandatory School Governance Councils for schools all across the state that are underperforming. Half of all members of these councils are to be parents, and they are to work on school accountability plans, budgets, school compacts, and a handful of other tasks mirroring the responsibilities of members of Hartford's school governance councils. Clearly, Hartford has not needed to wait for state laws to pass in order to start innovating within its schools.

While in Part I of Achieve Hartford!'s evaluation released in March, we noted that only 14 of 26 schools had met their membership requirements and attendance was hovering around 70%, during the second half of

the school year councils have performed well in meeting their goals. 100% of school governance councils signed off on their budgets on time, the vast majority have finalized their school compacts for next school year, and all are continuing to work on their school accountability plans. At one neighborhood school, Breakthrough II, for example, not one meeting has been missed, having held one meeting per month since January and reporting impressive attendance so far. Recognizing continual budgetary challenges, we encourage that ongoing training of school governance council members be provided, to insure a high level of participation by all members.

We look forward to releasing this summer a comprehensive evaluation of Hartford's first year of School Governance Councils, and encourage any and all feedback on the effectiveness of SGCs. From our vantage point, it cannot be overstated how important SGCs are to cultivating community responsibility for education and sustaining reform here in Hartford.

Thank you.