



221 Main Street, Third Floor
Hartford, CT 06106
www.achievehartford.org

Main: 860-244-3333
Toll Free: 866-440-2333
Fax: 860-525-0436

Comments by Jim Starr to the CT Commission on Educational Achievement – May 19, 2010

Good evening Chairman Simmons and good evening to all the members of the Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement. My name is Jim Starr and I am the Executive Director of Achieve Hartford!

Achieve Hartford! is an independent, nonprofit organization of business and community leaders that focuses on student achievement and supporting effective and sustained reform in the Hartford Public Schools. Our funders, who are some of Hartford's largest employers, recognize the importance of having a thriving public school system in their home city. We believe that a system of high-performing public schools is essential for our children and for the future of Hartford. We were founded to foster external accountability of the district's reform efforts and build community ownership of educational improvements.

As you hopefully know, The Hartford Public School system is making good progress toward the goal of closing the achievement gap. After multiple years of performance declines, we have now seen two years of promising gains. A summary of those gains and our perspective on Hartford's reform has been separately provided to you in our Summary Profile piece. Using district and State data, supplemented with our own research, we have published the Summary Profile, and we view it as a good overall picture of the district's performance based on relevant data.

Achieve Hartford!'s work is guided by our own adopted theory of reform. While there are many theories and aspects of effective reform, we have focused on five key elements. Effective long term reform should include:

1. A Culture of High Expectations
2. Effective Teachers
3. Strong Leaders
4. High Performing School Options
5. Community Responsibility for Education.

Tonight, I want to discuss two areas that we believe can move the needle for kids, both grounded within these adopted theories:

1. The use of data to drive transparency, measurement and accountability; and
2. Effective Parental engagement.

Even with the most simplest of concepts, you can't fix something if you can't identify the problem. Effective use of relevant, consistent data is the only real means to isolate issues and then begin to formulate solutions. Moreover, in environments of indecision and political wrangling (often seen in struggling school districts), data that affirms an indisputable reality is critical to establishing a baseline for measurement. Creating a culture of high expectations, and in turn, high performing schools, must start with establishing where situations really stand. Moreover, closing the achievement gap is a long term play and cannot be realized unless it is measured and tracked over time

In Hartford, the district has used data effectively to, among other things, determine school closing needs, track school progress, and publish a graduation rate that more accurately depicts the commencement reality of Hartford. There are many other examples of effective uses and the District is now building a data dashboard to track key measures that are consistent with their Strategic Operating Plan.

However, as good as data is, it cannot drive transparency and accountability without being accessible to more than just district personnel and policy makers. The real power of data comes when more people can access it and understand it. Therefore, it must be made available and translated to the general public, where it can be an important means for parents and others to become more engaged. In one example, through our *SmartChoices* Program, on which we partner with Trinity College and ConnCAN, parents and others seeking better schools now have timely and relevant data to help them navigate school choice. *SmartChoices* was formed in an effort to fill the information gap that was undercutting the promise of school choice in the Greater Hartford region. It's not that no one was collecting data on every school, but that no one was efficiently putting it into the hands of parents and stakeholders. *SmartChoices* is an interactive website where by simply typing a home address and child's grade into a search box, *SmartChoices* automatically maps all of the public schools for which a parent's child is eligible. The website contains over 200 schools in the City of Hartford and the 18 nearby suburban districts, and lists schools by name, distance, racial balance, test score and test score growth. Over 3,000 parents utilized SmartChoices this year, up more than double from last year, and SmartChoices

served as the primary tool in parent choice trainings that helped Hartford school choice applications increase by 49% over last year. *SmartChoices* is a clear example of effective data usage.

Secondly, we believe that the closing of the achievement gap in Connecticut is going to be heavily dependent on how parents become increasingly involved in and effective advocates for their children's education - a key aspect in developing community responsibility for Education. In urban communities – the very areas that are driving the achievement gap here in Connecticut – parents care deeply about their child's education, but are less involved largely due to work commitments, high poverty, strained home environments and, importantly, little modeling on how to effectively be involved. Research is compelling regarding this, and probably obvious. The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools conducted a meta-analysis of over 51 studies looking at the relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement and yielded “[...] a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and [...] improved academic achievement”. One study in particular showed that, “The more families support their children's learning and educational progress, both in quantity and over time, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education.”(1)

In order to get more families engaged, trainings, tool kits and other programs need to be designed – in and out of the school system – that teach parents simple, but effective ways to advocate for and participate in their child's education. Then, on the district and school side, there must be policies and practices in place to engage these parents as partners. Such a partnership is crucial to speeding up student achievement in our urban communities. If parents and other stakeholders know that they are part of the solution and critical to the well being of a learning environment, ownership of sustained reform and continuous quality improvement can then be embedded in a culture beyond the school walls.

A great example incorporating this concept is School Governance Councils, or SGCs, now being incubated in Hartford. These councils are community based and made up of at least 50% parents. They are the local school decision-making body and are devoted to achieving a school's mission and vision. SGCs focus on the analysis of student achievement, development of improvement plans, allocation of resources and programmatic and operational changes which enhance the quality of the school and the achievement of its students. The concept of SGCs is not unique to Hartford. They have been adopted in various forms in other cities under reform theory that emphasizes localized school decision-making as an effective driver of improving student performance. Our research looked at Boston, Cincinnati and Chicago. Interestingly, SGCs are also an important part of the reform legislation just passed in Connecticut and the language looks structurally similar to Hartford's. We have provided to you our interim independent analysis of the year 1 implementation of Hartford's SGCs. We look forward to publishing our full year report in early summer. We believe that SGCs, and inclusive community programs like them, make principals better leaders and fosters necessary community responsibility and ownership, which is a requirement for sustained improvement.

Finally, I want to highlight that the Hartford schools are immensely fortunate to have in place a three-year Strategic Operating Plan. It is not only a thoughtful and researched plan, but it's a highly public one, offering specifics that are measurable. We encourage you to read it as part of your work.

As we all know, the achievement gap in Connecticut is very real. It is also unacceptable. ALL children, including those who are from lower income or non-English speaking homes, are entitled to the best our educational system can provide. We at Achieve Hartford! support reform efforts that can achieve that result, and we greatly support the work being undertaken by this commission. The students of Hartford, as well as others from the rest of the state that are experiencing the unacceptable gap, deserve no less.

Thank you.

(1) Miedel & Reynolds (1999),” Sanders & Herting (2000), Marcon (1999)