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YOUR VIEW: JAMES L. STARR AND MAYRA ESQUILIN

HARTFORD SCHOOLS MUST CONSOLIDATE GAINS

On Aug. 31, nearly 23,000 Hartford Public School students returned to a still fragile, yet improving, system of schools. As evidence, the last two years of Hartford Connecticut Mastery Test results show a gain of nearly six points, an approximate 25 percent improvement from 2007 for students reaching the goal. This gain is noteworthy, and, while we should not let up on the goal of completely closing the achievement gap, we must take note of and recognize the significance of improvements along the way.

Consider the following: For students in more affluent, suburban settings, a three-point annual improvement could influence the college tier to which they apply; however, for many urban students like Hartford's, such a gain could mean the difference between dropping out or staying in school. Another year of a similar gain could mean the difference between barely graduating and obtaining a full-time job. One more such gain could mean the difference between obtaining a steady lower-wage job and attending college. You get the picture as this pattern continues. To be sure, schools in Hartford currently have many bright, high-performing students. Nevertheless, when the school system

is considered as a whole, consistent and incremental gains can provide life-changing opportunities for the majority of our students.

After multiple years of performance declines, the Hartford school district witnessed a second straight year of improved test scores in 2009. Reform efforts adopted by the board of education and spearheaded by Superintendent Steven Adamowski are making a difference. The 2009 mastery test results show that the Hartford Public School system is progressing toward the goal of closing the achievement gap that exists between Hartford and rest of Connecticut. Overall, the mastery test results improved by 3.7 percentage points, which was 1.5 times higher than the statewide average gain of 2.5 points. Reading scores in particular improved in all grades, with an average districtwide improvement of nearly 4 percentage points. Also, as reported this week, high school graduation rates have climbed to 42 percent.

Combined with the progress we saw in 2008, it is evident that our students are learning at

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improving rates—largely due to the district's reform initiatives, along with inspired school leadership, effective classroom instruction from our teachers and increasing parental involvement. The results are very encouraging, and the community should acknowledge them and their importance.

Despite this progress, however, Hartford's achievement gap remains. Overall, Hartford students perform nearly 30 points below state mastery test averages in proficiency. The extreme income disparity between Hartford and the rest of the state contributes significantly to Hartford's comparatively low performance.

The goal of closing this gap must be our continued focus, and the two years of improvement are a good start. To close the gap, however, the city's public school system needs another eight years of improvement at similar rates of gain. Understanding the length of this journey at the outset is critical to successful and sustained reform. Although such a long journey of improvement will be quite difficult, it is not

impossible. The current reform efforts provide evidence that we can develop high-performing schools in our capital city. Furthermore, the improvements realized along the way will be critical and the benefits should not be underestimated.

All children, including those from lower-income or non-English speaking homes, are entitled to the best our educational system can provide.

We at Achieve Hartford! support any reform efforts that can accomplish that result. It is in everyone's long-term economic benefit to react sustained reform in Hartford and to see the achievement gap narrowed and eventually closed; it is also a shared moral and social responsibility.

The students deserve no less.

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