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## OTHER VOICES

# Hartford School Reform Measures Are Working

By Michelle Morey

There has been a remarkable level of energy and excitement surrounding the recent unveiling of Hartford Schools' 2010 test results. A third year of improvement has confirmed a trend that all who care about Hartford — and its future — should feel good about. As a business leader in Hartford, I celebrate with the students over this success.

This year's gains are undoubtedly the result of strong execution on the ground, and they should encourage the community to cheer the reform efforts adopted by the district, as well as the hard work and dedication of teachers, principals, and parents.

However, we still have a way to go before declaring victory, and we need to continue to support Hartford's reform strategy. Maintaining that strategy, and protecting the momentum it has created, is absolutely crucial, not only because we have a moral obligation to all of our children to prepare them as best we can for the world they will inherit, but also because Hartford's economic health is dependent on a school district that produces students who will perform and compete in our future workforce and "give back" to our community.

In a state where educational attainment constantly ranks among the highest in the country, Hartford's students, unfortunately, have long been underperforming. But, things have begun to turn around. Hartford's school-reform efforts launched in 2007 are clearly demonstrating that a culture based on high expectations and accountability can

bear impressive results.

The percent of Hartford students performing at proficiency levels in grades three through eight has increased 9.3 points, reflecting an improvement of nearly 20 percent since 2007. Likewise, for tenth graders, there was a similar 20 percent increase — and an annual 3.3 point increase — over the past three years. While Hartford's 2010 graduation statistics won't be available until September, last year's graduation rate of 42 percent, while still unacceptably low, is up significantly from 29 percent in 2007.

The economic and social consequences of dropping out of high school are enormous. Research conducted last year by Andrew Sum of Northeastern University shows that, over his or her lifetime, each Connecticut dropout costs the state approximately \$100,000. Compare this to a college graduate who contributes \$1.1 million back to the state. On a national level, Princeton researcher Cecilia Rouse notes that, unless high schools are able to improve their graduation rates, nearly 13 million students will drop out over the next decade resulting in a loss to the nation of \$3 trillion.

So, despite the good news, the achievement gap is still large for Hartford, and the challenges ahead of us remain daunting, difficult and vital for our future. Hartford will struggle to attract and grow businesses if a significant percentage of its young adults continue to lack a high school diploma. And, despite three years of improvement, still only 27 percent of Hartford third graders currently read at grade-level compared to 57 percent in the entire state, while only 37 percent of Hartford's seventh graders are considered at grade level in Math versus 69 percent statewide.

If we hope to have a workforce that can compete in the 21st century and give back to Hartford, we need a school system that can consistently prepare our children to be

successful members of our workforce and our community. To steal a phrase, failure is not an option.

Our business community believes that a quality public education system is essential for Hartford's future. Achieve Hartford! was created out of that conviction. And, as an independent, nonprofit organization of business and community leaders, we're focused on supporting student achievement and effective sustained reform in the Hartford Public Schools. Our supporters — who include some of Hartford's largest employers, such as Prudential, Aetna and Travelers — recognize it is in everyone's long-term economic and social interests to see successful educational reform become a cornerstone of our city's public school system.

We must do everything we can to avoid the up and down cycles that were a fact of life in Hartford schools for so many years. Instead, we must encourage consistent and steady growth in student achievement because this is the only way to close the existing achievement gap. Most importantly, Hartford residents need to believe that positive change can take place, and they must maintain trust in their school system. To do this, all stakeholders of education — including the next superintendent — must commit to building on the foundation that's been put in place over these last few years.

The next phase of school reform requires us to build lasting support for continued educational improvement in Hartford. We must maintain our high expectations and continuously raise the bar for our students — and our community — because, as the recent positive trend in test scores demonstrate, students can rise to the occasion and meet demanding standards. ■

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