

## Education Reform: A Moment too Important to Miss

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While heated political debates can tempt the observer to cynical conclusions, the passions that polarize can only arise when the participants are truly invested in the topic at hand. Such is the case for the education reform discussion in Connecticut, which is generally manifest to the public in the headline-making rhetorical flares of the day. At the extremes, these assertions might variously suggest that the reform agenda is anti-teacher, or that teachers don't really care about students. Either version in any permutation is far from the truth. Indeed, there are significant areas of agreement on elements of reform. For example, the Malloy Administration's proposal for increased teacher training is a direct response to 85% of teachers who say professional development is among the most important tools they need to foster student achievement, according to a 2012 Scholastic/Gates Foundation survey. Here in Connecticut 71% of teachers turn out to welcome performance assessments, when given the training resources to improve weaker areas identified in their evaluations. The Science Center is witness to this, observing the enthusiasm with which teachers embrace the opportunity to become more effective in our professional development programs. After all, good science teachers will be the beneficiaries of the State Department of Education's increased focus on science, technology, engineering and math, which is crucial in a state where just 35% of eighth graders passed an optional national science exam.

It's appropriate that much of the reform discussion focuses on the achievement gap among urban and suburban students. But it's important to remember that even our suburban schools do not compete well on a global scale, particularly in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields. Our nation's achievement gap relative to competing economies is just as serious, which is why the governor proposes a much broader education reform that is also necessary. Among other things, a comprehensive plan to better prepare our students to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is also critical to improving Connecticut's fortunes in future federal education funding competitions, such as Race to the Top.

Another important aspect of the reform debate involves the scale and scope of intervention available to the state to help turn around our most troubled schools. While the governance mechanics of this are not trivial, the bottom line in our experience can be dramatic improvement in teaching and morale, family involvement and student results. For example, Hartford's Annie Fisher STEM Magnet School paired strong leadership with quality facilities and resources such as intensive professional development for teachers to deliver a success culture and double-digit Connecticut Mastery Test increases for city students in every key subject. The beneficiaries of success are not just the students, their families and their communities, but the teachers who will carry this achievement as a personal and professional legacy the likes of which anyone would be proud. These are the kinds of best-practice models the reform initiative aims to make available to educators and students in all the most challenged schools. Our collective legacy must be to assure that no discrete area of disagreement prevents the most urgent and promising components of reform from being implemented as rapidly as possible.

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