

Statement by Gwendolyn Eaddy-Samuel, Parent, Founder of the Connecticut Parents Union
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Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
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Good Morning Chairman Hunter, Ranking Minority Member Kildee, committee members, and distinguished fellow panelists. I am honored to participate in this conversation about the vital role that parent and family engagement should play in improving our education system to ensure that all children have equitable access to high quality educational options, and to help our country become more economically stable and just.

My name is Gwendolyn Eaddy-Samuel. First and foremost, I am a parent of two children in Connecticut public schools. I am a proud Head Start Alumna. I am the Founder of the **CT Parents Union (CTPU)**, a membership association established to connect parents, guardians and families with the resources and support necessary to effectively advocate for the educational rights of children through shared decision making, parent choice, equitable resources, fiscally responsible spending, and access to effective school boards, principals and teachers.

In 2010, I was part of a coalition that introduced a version of the so called “Parent Trigger” law to Connecticut. Our version of the Parent Trigger law allows parents to make recommendations about governance changes to reform consistently low-performing schools. The downside to our version of the parent trigger law is that the details were developed in closed-door sessions that deliberately excluded parent groups. As a result, governance reforms can be too-easily delayed and watered down, leaving students trapped in failing schools.

In my testimony today, I want to make three points. First, I want to be clear about the problem. Second, I want to dispel some myths about parents and their engagement. And third, I want to be clear about the solution.

First, let’s talk about the real problem.

Using my great state as an example: an analysis of the State of Connecticut using almost any indicator of socio-economic progress quickly reveals stark contradictions in the opportunities available to its residents. Connecticut, one of the richest states in the nation, is also home to some of the nation’s poorest cities. Our state is home to some of the most prestigious schools in the nation, yet even our low-performing schools underperform low-performing schools elsewhere in the country. As a result, our state has the widest academic achievement gap in the nation, observable between rich and poor students, and between students of different races. The socio-economically disadvantaged in Connecticut’s urban cities tend to be people of color, trapped in schools that persistently fail to meet their need for a quality education.

As an example, a male who fails to graduate from high school is 47 times more likely to spend time in prison than a peer who finishes college. More than 40% of Black children do not graduate from high school. And prison, at least in Connecticut, costs us more than \$50,000 per inmate – more than three times what we spend on students in schools. At a time when other

countries are elevating their performance, and when the economy is requiring greater skills, we are not investing wisely if we fail to meet the needs of our children.

Second, let's dispel some myths about parents.

One myth is that these problems are all the parents' fault. When my state's Governor, Dan Malloy, took a tour throughout Connecticut to promote education reform, some local labor leaders greeted him with white papers and other arguments that parents "are in denial and blame the school or the teacher for their child's behavior."

Let's take care of this myth that it's the "parents fault" once and for all. What actually happens when parents try to get involved in their children's schools? What actually happens is that the bureaucracy shuts them down.

- Take the example of Kelley Williams-Bolar, an Ohio mom who I arranged to come to Connecticut to address a group of parents. Ms. Williams-Bolar tried to get her children into a safer school than the one that existed in her neighborhood. She could not afford to move to a better school district, so she simply lied and said that she lived in a better district, so that her children could go to that safer school. How did we respond to this parent who wanted to send her kids to a better school? She was sent to jail.
- Or what about when parent groups tried to organize to get more involved in the legislative process in Connecticut back in 2010? I mentioned a moment ago that the Parent Trigger policy was weaker than it should have been because parents groups were excluded. In fact, if you look at a PowerPoint that was presented at a National Conference by the American Federation of Teachers in Connecticut, you'll see that excluding parent groups was a deliberate strategy. In all fairness to AFT, some Connecticut parents were able to meet with union leadership; they apologized and removed the document from their website.
- Or, coming back to Connecticut, look at the Hartford area, the second poorest city in the country and the city with some of the lowest performing schools in the state. Nearly 16,000 students entered the Greater Hartford Regional School Choice lottery this year to get into good magnet or charter schools – but more than 10,000 of them were rejected. These are thousands and thousands of parents, just in Hartford, who are taking the time to do right by their kids.

As parents, we are legally required to send our kids to schools and we are legally required to pay for those schools with our taxes. So we are compelled to provide the money and the children but often have very little say in the outcomes. These types of experiences affect the parents' will to become more engaged within school environments. Many parents feel no matter how hard they try to help improve educational outcomes for their children, they will face resistance.

Another myth is that parents and teachers are adversaries. This is a myth. Teachers have many different points of view, and too often you only hear one point of view. Many teachers *celebrate* actively engaged parents. You will hear a lot of educators who welcome parent engagement and parent choice. And to be clear, as a parent, I *always* celebrate great teachers who will help my children learn.

Finally, let's talk about the solution.

Part of the solution is adapting responsive public policy. In my home state of Connecticut, we saw the beginnings of “best practice” solutions. We had a Governor propose education reforms. These reforms were just a start – I’ll get to that in a minute – but they were a good start.

Those opposed to meaningful education reform did the exact same thing that they did in 2010 to attack Parent empowerment reform – they had closed-door meetings with legislators to try to water down the bill. And when this bill came out of committee, it was loaded down with loopholes and exceptions that would have made reform limited. In my opinion, this was about to be another story of how we failed to make things better for the neediest children.

But a funny thing happened. Parents became more active. Parents started contacting their legislators and calling them and writing them and talking about what they needed. Leaders from the African American faith community spoke up, demanding reform. The Governor Malloy provided air cover for parents, making it clear he would veto this bill if it kept all these loopholes. And, crucially, the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus in the Connecticut State Legislature came together. This is a part-time legislature, but they worked long hours to read this entire bill. They debated, and they listened to parents, and they went to their leadership to demand that most of those loopholes get stripped away. And pro-reform teachers spoke up, too. This clearly demonstrated that the public will exist to do right by children.

So, what do we need to do in Connecticut and elsewhere?

What we need is choice. Here is a list of things that all states must do to create more high-quality school options and relevant information for all students:

- State law must ensure that parents receive meaningful information about their schools and teachers, including a letter grade or some indicator easily identified by parents.
- Any school that accepts taxpayer funding for students – traditional, magnet, charter, or private – must submit to state financial review and student achievement review.
- States or districts should implement a disclosure rule granting parents knowledge of a teacher's track record regarding student achievement and allow parents to access an alternative, effective classroom.
- While Parent Trigger laws may vary from state to state, laws need to be put in places that allow parents to “trigger” a school turnaround when a school systemically fails to meet the needs of children. State law must be constructed to ensure that eligible federal dollars can be used to help fund the turnaround. Crucially, parents must be allowed to exercise this option without harassment or undue delay.
- Subject to these guidelines, state law and district policy should make high-quality choices available to students through the following tools:
 - All students should be funded equally, regardless of the type of school they attend, so long as the schools prove results in a timely manner.
 - Low-income students, children in foster care, homeless children and the neediest children should have access to public scholarships to attend high-quality public

- and private schools, so long as those private schools are willing to accept public oversight for safety, academic performance, and financial integrity.
- In collaboration with the State, charter schools with proven academic results should be encouraged to expand. Such schools should not face any numerical caps, financial disadvantage, or arbitrary and burdensome red tape. Instead, they should receive appropriate fast-track approvals, access to taxpayer-funded facilities (based on community need), and the ability to leverage public-private partnerships and funding.
 - Charter authorizers should be willing to approve new charter schools on a provisional basis, allowing them to demonstrate results, but moving quickly if they do not improve performance.
 - Districts should be required to pass on all of the approved per-pupil funding to school providers chosen by parents, with the exception of authorizer fees to manage accountability.
 - Low-performing schools must not be tolerated. The state must provide a clear mechanism to turn around low-performing schools — regardless of whether those schools are traditional public schools, charter schools, or private schools receiving public scholarship students. Any school with a sustained record of failure should not continue to receive public funding.

These reforms, together, will create the conditions that will allow parents to effectively engage with teachers and school leaders to create better outcomes for all children.

Most school districts across Connecticut and abroad are facing the impacts of this education and economic crisis. We will only improve outcomes if we build effective partnerships among parents and schools; spend our resources effectively; and provide meaningful high-quality choices for families. This is a much more realistic and just choice than burdening our society with failed schools, overcrowded prison and juvenile systems, and an overreliance on safety nets and social services.

In closing, it is immoral for children to be consigned to systemically low performing public schools.