

NEWS RELEASE

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Connecticut Alliance for Improving Teaching and Learning

AFT-Connecticut

Connecticut Association
of Public School
Superintendents

Connecticut Association
of Urban Superintendents

Connecticut Education
Association

Connecticut Federation
of School Administrators

Neag School of Education,
University of Connecticut

Innovation and collaboration are hallmarks of exciting *Urban Initiative*

HARTFORD (March 7, 2007) – Senate President Pro Tempore Donald E. Williams, Jr. and Education Committee Co-Chair, Senator Thomas Gaffey, flanked by union, school, and UConn officials, today announced a sweeping program that aims to improve urban education from the ground up.

Legislation being proposed by the senate leaders brings to life the *Urban Initiative* that would provide a new systemic approach to raising student achievement in urban schools. The central hub of the effort would be the establishment of a new Center for Urban Education at UConn's Neag School of Education. It, along with outreach centers proposed for UConn's branch campuses in Hartford, Waterbury, Groton, and Stamford would provide a range of "center services" enabling urban districts to integrate research-based, best practices into their classrooms.

Senator Williams said, "The broad array of services that we envision are too numerous to detail in one news release. Suffice it to say that this initiative would have an enormous impact when it comes to assisting urban educators in meeting the challenge of closing Connecticut's achievement gap."

Senator Gaffey said. "The time is right for this proposal that focuses on tapping the significant resources for educational change that exist within the boundaries of our own state. It has the potential to break new ground in bridging the relationship between public higher education and PreK-12 public education in our most challenged schools and districts with the goal of raising student achievement."

This proposal is Connecticut's first comprehensive initiative, supported by a coalition called the Connecticut Alliance for Improving Teaching and Learning. The unusual nature of the coalition, involving unions and associations representing teachers, administrators, superintendents, school boards, and higher education, speaks to the complexity of the challenges faced by urban school districts. The proposal addresses these challenges by stimulating a process of systemic change in urban districts.

By establishing the Center for Urban Education at UConn, the *Urban Initiative* would be well-positioned to lean on the Neag School's resources, research and experience. Ranked as the top public school of education in the northeast, the Neag School offers a broad range of expertise, including experience in improving learning at some of the nation's most challenging schools.

"We know from research that whole school change is needed to turn around student achievement and improve school climate," said Dr. Richard L. Schwab, dean of the Neag School of Education. "We are eager to be part of this historic coalition and appreciate the opportunity to provide both technical and research-based support to accomplish our ultimate goal of ensuring all children receive a quality education."

One center service would be a new school concept called *CommPACT Schools*. These schools would be modeled along the lines of Boston's Pilot Schools. Initial funding would support up to 12 schools. They would be formed through collaboration between the school administration and the teachers' union, and they would promote autonomy in governance, budgeting, and curriculum.

Phil Apruzzese, president of the Connecticut Education Association, said, "We are excited about the center's capacity to encourage districts and teachers unions to form *CommPACT Schools*. Through mutual agreement these schools would be given considerable autonomy in areas such as governance, budgeting, and curriculum along with greater accountability for increased student achievement. Special focus would be given to closing the achievement gap and stemming the increase of schools facing sanctions under NCLB."

A second center service would fill a large need that confronts urban school districts. That service concerns the attraction and retention of high-quality teachers. The center would provide both critical assistance to school districts in recruiting new teachers and an equally critical intense program of support for teachers after they are hired.

A third center service is considered a linchpin because it would promote "continuous improvement" as a fundamental practice. The center would work with member districts to develop and implement system-wide approaches to improve school climate and discipline using research-based and sustainable programs, recognizing that school climate and a culture of continuous improvement are inextricably linked with increased student achievement.

Sharon Palmer, president of AFT Connecticut, said, "We envision UConn's Center for Urban Education as a learning community in which all the stakeholders will have a voice. The center will work with member districts to promote and nurture collaboration at all levels of the system. In order for this to happen, school administrators, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers will require support and training. Real change demands new models of leadership at all levels."

A fourth center service would promote new thinking on how to engage parents with their children's school and education. (See the attached brochure for further details on services and the initiative.)

Dr. David Larson, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, said, "The goal of Connecticut's *Urban Initiative* is to focus attention and resources on raising the achievement of all of Connecticut's urban students with particular attention to closing the achievement gap. Connecticut's urban districts have some of the heaviest concentrations of poor and minority students in the nation. They deserve our best efforts."

Roch Girard, president, Connecticut Federation of School Administrators, said, "One of the many reasons that we are excited concerns the mentoring and support aspect of the initiative. The center would provide unprecedented opportunities for administrators to enhance their skills with critical support and coaching. We are confident that these additional opportunities would help to close Connecticut's achievement gap."

The center would begin its work in July 2007. After the formation and establishment of a governing body, it would conduct a needs assessment and develop a five-year plan with its member districts. The plan, along with a progress report, would be presented to the Joint Committee on Education in January of 2008. An annual report and any revisions to the plan would be submitted each year through January 2012.

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