

## Response to Stamford Residents for Excellence in Education

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Recently, the nation and our state have focused on the challenges of urban public education. The movie *Waiting for Superman* and the CT Commission on the Achievement Gap have proffered bold steps for reforming education. I support some of those measures and have great concerns about others (a topic for another op ed piece), however I am delighted that these issues are being discussed around dinner tables, in board rooms and in the media nationwide. I'm also amazed that while this critically important dialogue about change is going on among and around us, Alan Stockman and a small group of Stamford residents known as SREE seek to maintain the status quo and slow down progress rather than acknowledge the fact that our middle school transformation shows promise for all students.

The group Stamford Residents for Excellence in Education is opposed to our efforts to eliminate the vestiges of tracking that has kept generations of students of color in Stamford from attaining a high-quality education. This group sent their limited analysis of our CMT scores to me and the Board of Education a few months ago. In order to more fully understand their perspective, I invited them to meet with me. After I met with one of their leaders, they retracted their analysis. In addition, I invited them to participate in our Middle School Advisory Council meeting on Monday, October 25, 2010, to review the full data set from the first year of the Middle School Transformation effort. Yet, Mr. Stockman and SREE decided to publish their flawed and misleading analysis of our student achievement gains, which necessitates a response.

Mr. Stockman compares our recent Connecticut Mastery Test scores to the State, which I also do, along with similar districts throughout the State (District Reference Group G). Some of our 2009-10 results for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade are quite promising. Overall, we increased the percentage of 6<sup>th</sup> graders performing at/above goal (the higher standard) in math by one percentage point and in reading by nine percentage points. By comparison, the State increased two points in 6<sup>th</sup> grade math and five points in 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading. The comparisons by NCLB categories are more telling. In reading, at/above goal:

- Stamford White students increased six points, two points higher than the State
- Stamford Asian students increased fourteen points, seven points higher than the State
- Stamford Black students increased fourteen points, three points higher than the State
- Stamford Hispanic students increased ten points, one point less than the State
- Stamford Economically Disadvantaged students increased twelve points, one point higher than the State.

In math, at/above goal:

- Stamford White and Asian students increased by two and seven points respectively, which exceeded state gains

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- Stamford Black students increased by eight points, compared to five by the State
- Stamford Hispanic students lost ground by three points in comparison to the State
- Stamford Economically Disadvantaged increased by three points, compared to five by the State

When one looks at this comparison of last year's 6<sup>th</sup> graders to the previous year's 6<sup>th</sup> graders, overall, there were some substantial increases. While we expected an "implementation dip," which typically happens when introducing a new program, our highest performing students continued to do well and most of our lower performing students saw gains.

However, SREE's analysis neglects to consider our own past experience. Their analysis disregards the counterfactual – what would have happened to 6<sup>th</sup> graders if they had been exposed to the same type of instruction and grouping practices as they had in previous years? The question we initially asked of our CMT data was, How did our 6<sup>th</sup> graders do in 2009-10 in comparison to how our 6<sup>th</sup> graders did in previous years? By asking this question we can begin to understand if our instructional improvement efforts are increasing achievement for more children than what was previously provided.

Mr. Stockman uses the vertical scale scores – a scale that the State created to measure the growth of the same students over time – to try to prove his unfounded belief that raising expectations for all students and mixing students together somehow does a disservice to our children. In reading, vertical scale scores increased for every NCLB category more than they had in the previous four years, except for Students with Disabilities. That means that nearly all categories of students who were part of year one of Middle School Transformation demonstrated more growth this year than several cohorts of students before 2009-10. The same analysis for math tells a more nuanced story. For 6<sup>th</sup> grade students overall, growth was about the same as the growth of students in the previous year, with less distinct patterns among NCLB categories: growth among White and Black students was less than growth of earlier cohorts, while growth among Asian and English Language Learners students was higher than earlier cohorts and growth among Economically Disadvantaged students was the same.

Mr. Stockman also claims that Rockville Center is not an appropriate comparison for Stamford. There are no perfect comparisons to Stamford, nor do they need to be. We consistently benchmark ourselves against other districts. Curiously, many of those who fault our reference of Rockville Center simultaneously compare the performance of our students to students in other Fairfield county districts – districts whose comparative wealth and demographics are more similar to Rockville Center than to ours. Should we only use the experience of other districts when trying to prove a narrow point? Perhaps Mr. Stockman would prefer a lawsuit, such as the one that the NAACP of South Orange Maplewood, NJ is considering against that district because of their student placement practices. Mr. Stockman states that Rockville Center has put critically important conditions in place to support students, starting in Kindergarten. Here again, Mr. Stockman and SREE choose to disregard the facts. We have put supports in place to help students in all grades, and our reform efforts are K-12. We are implementing

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Scientifically Research Based Interventions (SRBI) throughout the district in order to provide intensive support to students. In the middle schools we have put an additional period in place for enrichment and support so that students get the help they need. In high school we have added double periods of math and English for students who are behind. I make no apologies for responding to the urgency to improve education for all students in every grade. If I had taken Mr. Stockman's suggestion back when I first became Superintendent to change instruction for one grade at a time starting in Kindergarten, we would only be up to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade this year.

Mr. Stockman and SREE also claim that their analysis was conducted with guidance from the State Department of Education. Not only did the State Department of Education set guidelines for and approve our Strategic District Improvement Plan, which delineates our move towards more heterogeneous grouping, but they passed a non-binding resolution to eliminate tracking throughout Connecticut after I and the Superintendent of Danbury presented to the State Board. The fifteen districts that are required to develop three-year improvement plans must include de-tracking strategies in order for their plans to be approved by the State. Moreover, State Commissioner McQuillan completely disavows any support of the SREE group's analysis. Perhaps SREE verified their computations with the State Department of Education, however, to claim the State's imprimatur to suggest that they support SREE's analysis and recommendations is disingenuous and misleading.

The suggestion of the SREE group that we revert to four or five flexible groups is a veiled attempt to return to the status quo, and, more harmfully, to the detriment of too many Stamford students. Mr. Stockman's suggestion that we examine promising practices here in Stamford is a good one; however, we must look at the whole picture rather than a narrow slice. Mr. Stockman notes the success that Westover Elementary has had, and I concur that it is a wonderful school. Yet they are not the only success story in Stamford. We doubled the number of schools that made Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) in Mathematics this year. This year, Toquam Elementary, which groups heterogeneously, was the only elementary school to reach the NCLB milestone of Safe Harbor. Rippowam Middle School, which has about half of its students in the heterogeneously grouped International Baccalaureate program, was the only middle school to make Safe Harbor. Newfield Elementary, which groups heterogeneously, has reduced the achievement gap in 5<sup>th</sup> grade math scores to five points between Black and White students. Stark Elementary has had some of the greatest vertical scale score gains in the district for the past two years. The Black/White reading gap at Scofield Middle School, which groups heterogeneously, is two points in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. At Westhill, where we have provided supports for teachers and students to increase access to Advanced Placement classes for low-income, Black and Hispanic students, we have seen more students taking and passing AP Exams. We still have a long way to go, but many of our schools have shown that there are multiple ways of achieving our goals.

Clearly Mr. Stockman is anxious to declare the failure of Middle School Transformation, based on limited data points that are spun, conveniently into unrelated recommendations. SREE asserts its claims are research-based, and while I am pleased that individuals and groups are embracing data analysis, I have

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not seen thoughtful, responsible responses to those data. Reformers know that multiple years of information are necessary to fully understand the impact of a new program on student achievement. Our Strategic District Improvement Plan (posted on our website) delineates the many results indicators we track in order to understand our progress – which I shared with SREE when we met. One of the sources of data we look at to gauge our progress is feedback from teachers and administrators. Middle School Teachers have told us in confidential focus groups conducted by an outside agency that they believe the initiative benefits many students, that curriculum and professional development have improved significantly, and, more importantly, that they would like to see true heterogeneous grouping, similar to Scofield. To suggest that we are teaching to the middle is a direct affront and insult to our dedicated teachers who have willingly risen to the challenge of differentiating instruction, learning new curriculum and providing an excellent education to all of our children.

Since I arrived in Stamford, we have narrowed the achievement gap in math by twelve percentage points in grades three through eight, and in reading by six percentage points. Narrowing the gap means that differences in achievement have lessened, and that no groups of students have lost ground. In 2005-06, 48% of 6<sup>th</sup> graders were at/above goal in math, today, 63% are. In 2005-06, 58% of 6<sup>th</sup> graders were at/above goal in reading, today 70% are. Only 18% of Black 6<sup>th</sup> graders were at/above goal in math when I arrived, we've increased that to 42% – not high enough, but certainly an improvement. In reading, the percentage of 6<sup>th</sup> grade Black students at/above goal has increased during my time here from 32 to 48%. Hispanic students have seen similar increases in reading and math as Black students. White and Asian student performance has gone up as well. If we were teaching to the middle, we wouldn't see those kinds of increases.

Finally, Mr. Stockman and his SREE colleagues appear to have a political agenda, as he says in his last paragraph that change will happen through the election process. The Board of Education has no authority over student placement decisions. It is the purview of the Superintendent and building principals to provide each and every student with high-quality instruction. More importantly, Board of Education members typically have a much broader view than the single-issue emphasis that SREE would prefer. They approved the Strategic District Improvement Plan that delineates our efforts to de-track; they accepted an additional \$10.4 million from the GE Foundation, a gift that is explicitly conditional on our continuing de-tracking strategies and unlike SREE, they understand that measuring success is much more complicated than the manipulation of select data points. They have also asked me to engage with parents who oppose my efforts. I listened to the Board's advice, I invited SREE in to talk about their results with me and we brainstormed some ideas to make changes this year and in the future – I invited them to the larger discussion of the results with the Middle School Advisory Council, they retracted their analysis, but their recent actions lead me to believe that their method of "change" would really be turning back to the outdated and morally reprehensible practices of segregating students.