

CONNECTICUT POST

All Connecticut's Communities Have a Stake in Addressing the Achievement Gap of Our Urban Youth

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The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding v. Rell is a potentially landmark legal challenge that could deal a body blow to the state's inequitable education system.

Judge Moukawsher has given policymakers 180 days to address the disparities in public education between wealthy and poor communities of Connecticut. Still, we should recognize that proper calibration of education budgets, while absolutely necessary, is not sufficient to address the achievement and success gaps among our young people, as highlighted in recent news coverage.

The problem of poverty runs much deeper than school budgets. As Fairfield Board of Education chair Philip Dwyer put it: "A suburban family can get their kids to museums, they can travel, can get special tutors, they can get enrichment classes... suburban children have more enrichment activities before they even start public school than the typical urban child, and that makes a difference."

Beyond a budgetary gap affecting school supplies and bus routes, Dwyer and others are pointing to the pernicious development gap among our young people — a gap in the capacity to be worldly, engaged and engaging, curious, and able to see and seize upon new opportunities and experiences.

What sparks development includes the "3 Rs," but as most educators such as Dwyer appreciate, it must be complemented by exposure to a broad range of experiences outside of school, which are also powerful contributors to success. The state funding issue takes aim at the former, and it is in urgent need of resolution. However, real success will come only when we can complement adequate formal education with afterschool development opportunities that expand the vistas of youth in Bridgeport and other urban centers to the entire world.

Appreciation of the importance of outside-of-school enrichment activities is not new. In 1902, the 4-H Club, for example, was inaugurated to build better citizens; and there have been many iterations of enrichment programs since. However, in our urban communities, we as a society have under-invested in such programs that help kids grow as people and as learners.

Supporting these extracurricular activities is where a partnership between the public and private sectors can make a critical difference. Private, non-profit organizations, churches and other community institutions excel at offering innovative and flexible programming that focuses on self-respect, self-reliance and real-life experiences through exposure to the working world, training in grooming, deportment, normative behavior in the adult environment, etc.

I have been involved in a few of these programs here in Connecticut and in New Jersey. The Rutgers Future Scholars program, for example, invites economically disadvantaged seventh graders in Newark, Camden and other N.J. urban centers to join a pre-college preparatory pipeline, supplementing their schooling with academic, civic engagement and leadership activities and mentoring. If the students succeed in being admitted to Rutgers, the program covers their tuition for four years. The first cohort of Scholars graduated in 2014 and are engaged in professional work and graduate school. Although Rutgers is New Jersey's state university, only 21 percent of its annual budget comes from state appropriations - i.e., it is a public/private partnership.

In Bridgeport, the **All Stars Project Inc.**, a fully privately funded not-for-profit where I volunteer, reaches out to students from poor backgrounds to provide a variety of enrichment experiences. A leader in afterschool development, now in six U.S. cities, the program capitalizes on research showing that development can be life changing and can even jumpstart young people's interest and passion for learning. All Stars welcomes all students from our urban communities, irrespective of their academic accomplishments and capabilities.

All Stars Project co-founder, developmental psychologist Lenora Fulani, once said, "Poor children fail in school because they are culturally, emotionally, and experientially underdeveloped. If kids are underdeveloped, they do not become learners." As young people grow, become more cosmopolitan, they find a reason and motivation to learn. They're fired up with curiosity and purpose.

The impacts are tangible: "Growing up I never traveled or saw anything outside of Bridgeport," attests 16-year-old Valerie Plantaud, an alumna. "I thought that only certain people could succeed and that I wasn't one of them. It was hard for me to think that I could be something more. But I learned to take risks and go for it."

These are but two examples of the kind of innovative and flexible private- or hybrid-funded development programs that can generate success stories for our youth. The resources to drive them primarily come from outside the urban communities whose residents they serve. Thus every community in Connecticut has a role to play in improving outcomes for our urban youth — through resolving inequities in public school funding and by supporting outside-of-school development.

The achievement gap among young people will not be breached short of suburban and urban neighbors coming together in partnership to improve the quality of outcomes for all of our youth, and incidentally, the outcome metrics of our schools. The commitment is financial, but even more it's the human touch and engagement that we need. It's adults and young people from Fairfield, Greenwich and Bridgeport pulling together to support the development of our urban youth and of us all.

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