

JOINT COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & SMALL BUSINESS
TESTIMONY: JUNE 1, 2011

Community Development Partnership Act (H.988/S.1427)

Sponsored by Senator Sal DiDominico and Representatives Linda Dorcena Forry

Thank you, Senator DiDominico and Representative Forry for the invitation to speak with the distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Community Development & Small Business. I am here today to represent the impact stable housing, stable neighborhoods, and investment in local businesses will have on education, and in particular urban education. I am here to add my voice and ask you to support the Community Development Partnership Act, House Bill 988 and Senate Bill 1427.

My name is Mary M. Bourque and for the last seven years I have been the Deputy Superintendent of the Chelsea Public Schools and on July 1, 2011, I will become the Superintendent. I have been an educator for over twenty years and except for a short time teaching in the parochial schools of South Boston, I have been a teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, and deputy superintendent in the small urban school district north of here, in Chelsea, Massachusetts.

I would like you to stop and think for a minute, how many times did you move from one residence to another when you were in grades Kindergarten through your high school graduation? I don't know about you, but I never moved. I was born in Chelsea, attended and graduated from the Chelsea Public Schools. Would it surprise you to know that in a three-year longitudinal analysis I discovered that on average only 14% of the students sitting in our kindergarten classes today in the John Silber Early Learning Center in Chelsea will stay with us and graduate from Chelsea High School? Would it surprise you to know that already this school year 657 students have transferred into the Chelsea Public Schools and 707 students have transferred out of the Chelsea Public Schools? That is a total of 1,364 students moving—fully 25% of our student population. And this is not our worst year.

What I am talking about ladies and gentlemen is student mobility and in 2008 when I was completing my doctoral research on the impact of student mobility on urban school districts in Massachusetts I interviewed one young woman who had moved 20 times and she was only a junior in high school.

Student mobility is the constant flow of students enrolling in and transferring out of a school or school district throughout the school year. From my research we identified patterns of student mobility in urban districts related to issues of poverty, employment, housing, families in crisis, and immigration. School districts were categorized as mobile, highly mobile, and hypermobile. Student mobility was found to be as strong a predictor of academic achievement as low-income.

Highly mobile students are more likely to have lower academic performance and achievement, be at risk for dropping out, exhibit behavior problems, and be retained or fail a grade (Hirsch, 2006; Rumberger, 2002; Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996; Kerbow, 1996). In addition to the academic challenges, highly mobile students may suffer varying degrees of psychological and social adjustment difficulties (Rumberger, Larson, & Palardy, 1999). In turn, non-mobile or stabile students may experience a decrease in academic rigor and disrupted peer relationships (Hartman, 2006; Williams, 2003). Possible effects on schools existing in a culture of high student mobility include higher teacher turnover, a lack of curriculum coherence, lags in curriculum pacing, and increased fiscal responsibilities for tutoring and remediation (Hirsch, 2006; Hartman, 2006; Kerbow, 1996). These schools, our public schools across our great state, function in a setting of pervasive instability. Ironically, education reform initiatives, implicitly presume "all students will attend a specific school consistently enough that the school can make a difference in their achievement" (Kerbow, 1996, p.1). However, this assumption is not the reality for most urban schools in the United States or in Massachusetts.

And, yet, there is hope. I found strong quantitative evidence in my research to support that the higher performing students have attended the Chelsea Public Schools for a longer periods of time. In other words, the stabile student population performs better in our schools. I was able to replicate these results for every school district in Massachusetts over a two-year span. Stability translates to higher academic achievement.

What the research results imply is that if we intervene at the state and local level to provide more opportunities for families to stay in one place, one house, one neighborhood for longer periods of time, then we will see the benefit in academic achievement and we will see a narrowing of the achievement gap.

Ladies and gentlemen, I see this legislation as an opportunity for our state to support strong economic development in our struggling communities in order to stabilize the lives and thereby the educational experience of our students. It is an opportunity for legislators to link arms with community development and urban education reform initiatives around that powerful intervening concept of "stability". Ultimately, this legislation is the most innovative and holistic of ways to attack the problem of the achievement gap. I ask that you support House Bill 988 and Senate Bill 1427.

Thank you.



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