

Testimony

“The State of the American Child: What’s Working for Connecticut’s Children”

July 26, 2010, New Haven, CT

There are 4 major synergistic systems that are the primary determinants of the child’s development. The first and most important is the family. Then there is the health system, the education system the child experiences and finally child care where the majority of children spend the first 5 years of their life prior to school entry. The family today is experiencing so much stress that it has difficulty in performing its primary child rearing responsibilities. Thanks to federal legislation the health system has improved for children but is still far from perfect. We have known that the education system is far from excellent ever since the publication of *The Nation at Risk*. Our nation’s non-child care system actually harms millions of children as I documented in my recent book [The Tragedy of Child Care in America](#). This morning I would like to acquaint you with a whole school reform model that my colleague Matia Finn-Stevenson and I have now successfully put into place in this country. These new schools have been named Schools of the 21st Century. However the 60 schools in CT (mounted originally through the efforts of John Larson) and the statewide system of schools in KY are called Family Resource Centers. The purpose of these schools was to positively impact each and every one of the 4 systems that we know largely determines the child’s development. Given my long involvement with our nation’s groundbreaking Head Start program, unsurprisingly the theoretical principles underlying the 21C school model are similar to those of Head Start. The schools adopt a whole child approach in which we attempt to positively impact the child’s cognitive development, social emotional development and the child’s mental and physical health. Thus like Head Start

our schools provide comprehensive services that go far beyond the standard provision of academic-focused education only. Like Head Start parents are viewed as the most important determinant of their children's growth and parents are deeply and actively involved in each and every School of the 21st Century. This aspect of Schools of the 21st Century is very similar to that of the very successful Child Parent Centers in the city of Chicago.

A particularly innovative aspect of 21C schools is that the child is enrolled in the neighborhood school as close to the child's conception as possible and no later than birth. Upon the birth of the child the school sends a home visitor to the home and these home visits continue for 3 years and employ the Parents As Teachers home visiting model which has been implemented in every school in the state of Missouri. These home visits focus on the parents' knowledge of human development as well as motivating parents to become as an effective first teacher of the child as possible.

At the age of 3 the child physically begins attending school in a high quality, 2-year preschool program rather than the one year preschool program that has become so common place in our nation. The preschool day is as long as the work day of mothers and fathers rather than the usual half day program or school day program which usually ends around 2:30 or 3:00. Thus one of our schools in Bridgeport is actually called the "6 to 6" school. This allows children to receive both preschool and after school care. Thus our preschools provide not only preschool education but child care as well. This before and after school care continues in the school until the child is approximately 12 years of age. Each school also mounts a health education component for parents and health services for children which include improved nutrition practices. Many of the

children in the schools catchment area are attending private child care. Our schools are aware that these children will eventually come to the school at age 5. Thus the schools provide outreach and training to these independent child care centers thus improving the child care experience of these non-school enrolled children.

Our schools also act as brokers for human resources that already exist in the community. Thus each school is also a resource and referral center in order to satisfy the other needs that the school's families have. From age 3 to age 12 the 21C parents have the child care they need for their children. This should reduce the stress that parents experience in dealing with the child care issue and our research shows that it does. Research clearly indicates that the more parents are involved in their children's education the better the child's educational performance. Like Head Start parent involvement is a basic pillar of Schools of the 21st Century.

This model has grown expedientially since its introduction some 20 years ago. It began originally in Independence, MO with 2 schools. Thanks to John Larson we began with 3 schools here in CT and we now have 60. Interestingly when Governor Rell recently wanted to cut Family Resource Centers from the budget, parents rose up and demanded that the Family Resource Centers continue and that is now the case. These schools can now be found in over 20 states. This model has now been embraced by over 1,300 schools making it the largest whole school reform model in the nation. The primary catalyst for this program has been parents themselves. Once they become aware of the Schools of the 21st Century in the next district they demand to have one of their own. Kentucky has now gone statewide with this model and

Arkansas is also moving to a statewide program, having already put into place over 160 21C schools.

I am both a pragmatist and empiricist and a strong believer in accountability. Thus from its inception we have included a strong evaluation component into the Schools of the 21st Century. The evidence of the value of these schools is contained in a series of positive findings associated with these schools. In addition to lower stress levels we have found much less vandalism in our schools and studies conducted both in MO and AK showed students in 21C schools had superior performance across a broad array of academic abilities than did the comparison children. For example in the Independence school district 4th grade students over 70% had proficient scores or above whereas the national average is about 33%. In a recent unpublished study we found that child abuse in the Independence district was reduced by two-thirds in comparison with another comparable school district in MO. Since child abuse is primarily a stress phenomenon this is not surprising since we discovered much earlier that 21C schools reduce the stress level of parents. I conclude my testimony with a single recommendation. The Dept. of Education should spend some of its school reform funds in bringing the 21C model to the attention of the nation and provide grants to schools to provide the seed money necessary for startup activities.