

Hartford Courant

Clear Choice: Invest in Schools, Or Prisons

by Stan Simpson

02/14/2009

The afternoon assembly for the "scholars" at Achievement First Hartford Academy recognized them for citizenship, work ethic and excellence in class. The banner above the wall in one of the city's struggling neighborhoods screamed "SOME OF THE HARDEST WORKING STUDENTS IN CONNECTICUT."

Yes, the teachers at one of the most anticipated new charter schools in Hartford lay the accolades on thick. It's by design. And the kids are eating it up. Already, teachers are seeing encouraging improvement in reading. No surprise, because part of the curriculum calls for 165 minutes of intensive reading each school day — broken into 30-, 90- and 45-minute blocks.

"The way they teach the kids; the way they discipline the kids; the curriculum. ... With this school, they teach it, but they reinforce it," said parent Marlene Browne, picking up her son, Zaelon Kerr, a kindergartner.

Browne, like a lot of school-reform supporters, is incredulous that Achievement First — in only its second year and modeled after the nationally acclaimed Amistad Academy in New Haven — is once again on the budget chopping block.

This was the school that the community rallied around last year and scrambled to patch together \$2 million because money promised by the state wasn't put in the budget.

The problem for the next fiscal year may sound familiar: money promised by the state wasn't put in the budget. There's nothing more deflating for school reform than to see new schools open piecemeal, then have their funding cut as they move to expand.

Several other charter schools, including those in Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport, face the same dilemma. Early childhood advocates and CREC, a regional education authority, also worry that Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposed budget will force the state to renege on its mandate to improve urban education.

"They're sending a negative message to the kids and parents," Browne said. "They give you something and then they're trying to take it away. In our community, it's like our kids are not supposed to get the best like everybody else's."

Last October, the Achievement First kids were giddy when Rell visited the school, praised the students and promised her support. The problem is that the Governor's budget proposal, as interpreted by charter school advocates, leaves charter expansion plans 500 seats short.

For example, Achievement First planned to add a second and sixth grade to its kindergarten, first- and fifth-grade school. A four-year plan calls for a complete K-8 system.

Rell's budget chief, Robert Genuario, said Friday he's willing to listen to school reformers who believe the budget limits their expansion plans.

"And if they have good data that indicates that the natural growth is more than what we estimated, we'll consider that, keeping in mind that we have a very significant [budget] deficit," he said.

Here's something else to keep in mind: Connecticut has the highest academic achievement gap in America between white students and their black and Latino peers. Black and Latino men in the state are incarcerated at rates that are among the highest in the country. Of the approximately 19,000 inmates, 75 percent are African American and Latino, most coming from urban centers. Connecticut's prison budget, projected to be \$712 million in 2010, is one of the budget's fastest-growing line items.

You get the picture. This is about deciding at which end you want to invest scarce public dollars — in early education, or incarceration.

Sounds like a good class project for the kids at Achievement First.