

Testimony of Dr. David P. Magnani on Chapter 70 Re-authorization

Mdm. Chair, let me thank you and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today. It was almost 27 years ago when we reported the original Education Reform Act, along with the first foundation budget, out of this committee. While I am proud to have been a small part of that effort, and am deeply impressed with DOE's collaboration with local schools to implement that act, I have come to believe that there was, and still is, a serious blind spot in our education funding that can now be corrected as you undertake your critical work to rewrite chapter 70.

The problem is this: we spend an average of \$25,000 for college tuition for our students between the ages of 18 and 22. Yet according to the Children's Trust Fund but, by comparison, spend little or nothing on family engagement and support for infants and toddlers, even 'though all of the research on the brain suggests that brain development is greatest at the earliest stages of a child's life, and that includes the need for a stress-free and nutritionally sound amniotic environment.

I realized this early in my career and did my doctoral work on the effects of a parent-child engagement program in Ashland. Yet, in public education, we have either minimized or ignored the critical role that parents play as the child's *primary educator*, whether for good or for ill. We even eliminated the Councils for Children which had become a national model for parent support and engagement.

We do have a system of parent support and education in Massachusetts but it is funded minimally and is poorly coordinated. I suggest that this committee now has an historic opportunity to change that.

Bill Walczak, who runs the South End Health Center has an experiment going on that brings obstetricians, pediatricians, early childhood educators and parent group support programs together to provide the earliest possible services for children's development for the greatest possible impact.

For children under 5, I would also observe that child care centers have little or no incentive or resources to devote to parent engagement, even when they are committed to it. Even the critical two minutes parents have to engage with teachers when they are dropping off their children at childcare, say to alert the teacher to an earache or tantrum, are lost when children are transported with carpools and busses.

You might ask "What does all this have to do with the public school system or chapter 70 for that matter?" Well, as the child's primary educators, parents do and must deal with the whole child. And often, in all of our public education institutions, parent engagement is seen either as a burden or at least an unsupported "frill." That is where chapter 70 comes in. Even if schools recognize and support parent engagement, Chapter 70, currently, does not. In fact, schools often see it as their job to correct or compensate for student deficits they may ascribe to poor parenting. While teachers in many schools are

heroic, given the challenges they face, they have no real mandate and few resources to support parents in their critical role in the learning process.

Many charter school advocates will tell you that the key reason for their success is the degree to which parents are involved with creating and operating the school. Yet, with district schools, parents are sometimes told, as I was when I attended an introductory middle school parents' night, "Don't call us - we'll call you."

When I chaired this committee, I proposed several parent engagement strategies for our schools, many of which are endemic to and often define charter schools. For example, I suggested that school councils, made up of parents, teachers, and community members, be asked to jointly approve, with the school principal, the school-based budget submitted to the school committee. This would dramatically increase and improve the quality of participation on School Councils and has been implemented successfully in other states.

Also, as a critical K-6 strategy, and to reduce the enormous administrative costs that go into funding special education, I proposed a system of individual learning plans (**ILP's**) for each child. This would not be a bureaucratically and legalistically burdensome process. It would merely require a *best efforts* approach to engaging each parent in a conversation with the teacher and a one-page outline as to what learning goals might be appropriate for an individual child. These could be revisited

at least once, later in the year, to track progress. This could begin on a pilot basis, but I am convinced it will more than pay for itself by reducing the number of IEP's, which engender enormous legal and personnel expenses.

Madam Chair, Massachusetts is a leader in providing services for children and families. This includes programs such as the Children's Trust Fund including its Family Networks, Boston Basics, the Parent-Child Home Program and many others. I would be delighted and honored to work with members of the committee or staff, with help from key providers and parent organizations, to draft appropriate language as part of a Chapter 70 amendment to implement the ideas presented in this testimony.

One final note: given that adopting this language would extend the boundaries of the current chapter 70 legislation, I would suggest that, included in the language of the amendment and perhaps in the drafting, legislative staff partner with staff from the The Children's Trust Fund, The Department of Children and Families and The Department of Early Care and Education.

Mdm. Chair, and members of the Committee, as we did with the Education Reform Act of 1993, we have an incredible opportunity to set a national example, this time by recognizing, involving and supporting parents, who are and always will be, the child's primary educators.

Thank you, Madame Chair, and members of the committee.

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