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TESTIMONY OF KIRSTEN LEVINSOHN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NEW HAVEN READS SUBMITTED
TO THE 119K COMMISSION ON DISCONNECTED YOUTH – FIRST PUBLIC HEARING, NEW HAVEN
March 26, 2024

Good evening Commission Chairs and members of the CCM 119K Commission on At-Risk and Disconnected Youth:

As the Executive Director of New Haven Reads, a nonprofit that supports children's literacy, I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this critical conversation about our disconnected young people.

New Haven Reads provides free, one-on-one, science-based literacy tutoring programs for struggling readers. Reading below grade level is the only criterion to participate. Our program is highly effective demonstrated by assessment data, parent accolades and our students' proud smiles. We serve 415 aspiring readers in kindergarten through 12th grade every week at five New Haven locations. And we have a waiting list of over 100 children waiting to join our program. Our program is effective with 100% of students improving their literacy scores from fall 2022 to spring 2023. Our students come from across the Greater New Haven area. The vast majority (89%) come from very low-income households.

There are multiple reasons why a student may be disconnected. One factor that requires particular attention is that so many students in middle and high schools did not acquire the foundational reading skills in the early grades that they needed to be successful readers. Students are passed on year after year without ever receiving those critical in-depth basic literacy skills. When students cannot read, there is an impact on every class they take, including math.

Whether a child can read or not, in a very real way, determines his or her destiny. This results in a high proportion of teenagers who are not skilled readers, who are not able to do their school work, and are more likely to drop out of high school. Moreover, they do not have the requisite skills needed for even many living wage jobs.

Teachers are working very hard to address these gaps, but they can't do it alone. The problem is massive and too complex as there are multiple other factors outside of school affecting these students. The pandemic clearly exacerbated these educational gaps, but they existed before COVID. Research from the National Center for Educational Statistics demonstrates that students born into poverty enter kindergarten at a disadvantage to more affluent peers. As they advance through the grades, they receive lower test scores. They're more likely to drop out and less likely to enter higher education.

In the summer of 2023, the City of New Haven created the New Haven Tutoring Initiative as a response by the City, New Haven Public Schools, and a group of youth serving agencies who came together to design a way to help address these challenges of educational gaps. The goal of the initiative is to increase literacy and math skills by providing coordinated opportunities through afterschool programs for students to learn critical literacy and math skills, build home libraries, and develop an enjoyment of reading and math.

New Haven Reads is both the Lead Literacy Organization and a participating organization for the Initiative. This Initiative is a key intervention opportunity to reach students in need and provides a flourishing example of how multiple agencies can partner successfully with the City, the school district, and community members for successful outcomes.

To be a strong, vibrant, flourishing state, our children must be able to read. A child who learns to read is more likely to finish high school, to go to college, get a good job, and be a taxpayer. He will have better health outcomes and he is much less likely to be incarcerated. He will feel more connected to our schools and community organizations.

New Haven Reads is glad to be part of the tremendous efforts in support of our state's young people. The power of a group of talented and passionate community members working together is formidable and boundless. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion. We look forward to the outcomes of this Commission.