

Statement of Mayor Melody Currey

My name is Melody Currey, and I am Mayor of the Town of East Hartford. Prior to my election to this office in 2005, I served for 13 years in the General Assembly, and so I know a little bit about what goes on — and doesn't go on — at the statehouse. I am also the recently elected Vice President of the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding and am here speaking as an officer of that nonprofit corporation.

The Town of East Hartford, on behalf of its schoolchildren, first challenged the State's failure to ensure an adequate education for all its schoolchildren as early as 1998, in a lawsuit known as *Johnson v Rowland*. Shawn Johnson, the lead plaintiff, was a child from East Hartford.

Unfortunately, as too often happens when it comes to legal costs, that litigation effort ran out of funding. Today, however, thanks to the generous pro bono representation of our talented Yale Law School Education Adequacy Clinic students and faculty, East Hartford stands together with parents, dozens of other municipalities, boards of education, education advocacy organizations, and unions, asking the Supreme Court of Connecticut to agree with the fundamental principle that every child has the right to an adequate education.

That the State, on behalf of the Governor, Treasurer, Comptroller, State Board of Education, and Commissioner of Education, could argue with a straight face that there is no right to an adequate education under the Connecticut constitution strikes me as preposterous. Surely our beloved Attorney General has gotten the State's position all wrong! How many times in a typical budget year does the term "a suitable education" creep into the remarks of legislative committees, public hearings, and chamber sessions? And how often has the term been used in state statutes or found its way into various reports issued by legislative staff offices and respected community-based policy organizations?

Yet, suddenly the State wants to pretend that all this was just talk, and that our schoolchildren actually don't have any right to a meaningful education. Should the Supreme Court agree with that outrageous viewpoint, then we're simply going to have to muster another constitutional convention to revise our constitution — for it needs to be made crystal clear, either by clarification or by this Supreme Court, that the State must never abrogate its responsibility to ensure that all Connecticut schoolchildren receive an adequate and equitable education.

The significance of the question the Supreme Court faces cannot be overstated. A ruling that children do not have the right to an adequate education could spell disaster for Connecticut's economy and even the social fabric of this state. In the face of such a ruling, it will be all too easy for state policymakers to justify the current practice of allocating far too few resources to PK-12 education, particularly to our lowest performing districts that serve the bulk of the state's poor, minority, and immigrant students. Despite Connecticut's worst-in-the-nation achievement gap, the Legislature and Governor of this richest state in the nation are already balking at fulfilling even the modest education commitments they have made. We cannot afford to have this Court decide that the quality of schooling doesn't matter in Connecticut.

My East Hartford predecessor, former Mayor Tim Larson, is known for having said that while he was in office, he'd awaken every morning, gaze into the bathroom mirror, and say to himself, "Governor, take my schools, PLEASE!" I certainly understand that feeling of desperation. It's a sad day when we elected municipal officials find ourselves unable to do what's right by our

children and our local taxpayers, while at the same time being unable to persuade the Administration or legislature to bring about the fiscal reforms so sorely needed.

However, I am deeply hopeful about this case and tomorrow's oral arguments. I believe that this litigation, starting with our Supreme Court appeal, will at long last lead to the adequate funding of our public schools so that all children may finally be provided with the learning opportunities they deserve. This, after all, is what we expect of a compassionate and forward-thinking government of the people, by the people, and for the people.