

TEXT OF SPEECH BY **BOSTON CITY COUNCILLOR, JOHN CONNOLLY**,
DELIVERED AT HARVARD STREET NEIGHBORHOOD HEALTH CENTER AT
632, BLUE HILL AVENUE, DORCHESTER, MA ON FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2009

By way of introduction, my name is John Connolly. I am a first time state councillor-at-large; one of four councillors-at-large; one of two-councillors at large not running for mayor and I'm in my first term. I'm just over a year on the job and I love it and for those of you who are Boston residents, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to work on improving the city. I can tell you, when I go into work everyday, I come out with the perspective in the form of sixth, seventh or eighth grade teacher for our children in every neighborhood in this city. I also work with at risk Latino youth in New York city – an alternative school there.

I go in everyday to try and improve our schools from that front but I've also been tasked with something that for me has really energized me . This is something I didn't know a lot about before I chaired the councils Environment and Public Health committee. For me it's been a lot of education over



John Connolly, left, speaks with the CEO, Dr. Chidi Achebe, center and the Lab Director, Horace Shearer

this first year in office – various public health issues, things I know you're incredibly familiar with and dedicate your lives to. I spoke at the B3 meeting at Mildred Avenue a few weeks ago, that's where of course I connected and one of the things I talked about there that Horace asked me to talk about a little bit this morning was one of my two key proposals.

I've proposed and filed legislation for a new truancy model here in the city to deal with our chronically absent

and chronically truant students and it's called Parental Accountability Model that I filed the legislation on. We will have hearings on it in about two months and I've been doing a lot of leg work on this. For those of you who are Boston residents I'm sure you're very familiar, particularly if you have children of school age, that we have a huge truant population in this city.

Everyday, thousands of schools aren't going to school. You know where we can find them. You can go to Downtown Crossing and you see them everyday. You can go to just about any T station and see kids everyday who should be in school. What I saw when I first started really looking at this issue as a councillor; and I encountered it a lot when I was a teacher - when I first started really looking at it as a councillor was that our chronically truant students, our chronically absent students can begin as early as kindergarten and we know the numbers skyrocket from seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth grade.

But our chronically absent students, even when we can identify them as early as kindergarten, are going to drop out. It's not a correlation. It's as absolute as something can be. If you're chronically absent from school, you're going to drop out. Then we can talk about correlations; and if you drop out, there is a very high likelihood that you will be incarcerated sometime in your life probably multiple times. When you drop out, there is a very high likelihood you will fall into addiction for the rest of your life. When you drop out, there is a very high likelihood that you will spend the rest of your life in poverty.

So what I have seen is that when you look at that seventh grader viewed as one child's issue or a school's issue or an education issue; by the time that child is seventeen or sixteen, it's a public health issue and a safety issue and a community issue and we didn't pay enough attention to it when we thought it was that one child's issue. We don't really have a uniform policy on how to deal with truancy in Boston and that's what prompted me to file this legislation and there's a bit of tough love in it and I've gone on, brought the city into it and continue to talk about what it's all about because I don't want people to get the wrong idea.

But it starts when we identify a chronically truant student, and the school's gone through with it's



normal procedures and there's no change, then it starts with an issuance of a summons to the parent. And I recognize that we're not dealing with families that are look like whatever family you see on a sit-com. A lot of times we are dealing with a single parent, a lot of times we are dealing with a single teen parent and a lot of times we are dealing with a parent who is under-resourced and bit over his or her head.

But it starts with that summons and yes, there is a piece of it that wants to be a wake up call because in a lot of cases, the parent does not even realize there is a child skipping school. In other cases, the parent does not have control over the child, that ability to get the child to school. But when that summons issues, it brings the parent or parents into a court – an appropriate court, juvenile court – to go before a judge and what happens here is key. It's the drug court approach if any of you are familiar with drug court programs. We stress treatment and intervention over punishment and incarceration.

This program will not put parents in handcuffs, it's not about sending parents off to jail, but it is about intervening, getting the parent in and saying, "What's going on here? Why is your son or daughter missing so much school". And we make no presumptions. Again it could be "we didn't know", it might be the child doesn't feel safe at the school that he or she has to go to. It could be that the parent is

battling an addiction, or it could be that there's a sibling who is taking all the time and attention because the sibling is dealing with a serious issue.

Whatever it is, we assess that families need through this program and then we deliver services by linking with Public Health organizations and community based organizations. If it's an after school program, we get the child an after school program. If it's extra help, we get the child extra help, if it's an issue for the father or mother, we get them help with that. If it's family counselling, we then family counselling. We deliver services after assessing the need. The program is modeled after a program in Waterbury, Connecticut. And if you're not familiar with Waterbury, it's a city, it's smaller than Boston, but the demographics and in particular the kids going to public school there mirror Boston very closely.

Waterbury, Connecticut when they put this program into practice, and their first pilot schools tested it there, they had chronically absent kids with over a thousand days of absence one year later down to less than a hundred days of absence. I went down to see it myself. I met with principals, I met with their deputy superintendent, I met with their people in the court, I met with the service providers. The program was working. Everybody was on board.

Interestingly, one of the key issues why people weren't going to school was about lice. There was a variety of what you might consider basic health issues that the parent or parents just didn't know how to access the services to get the children taking care of so the kid just wouldn't go to school. In other cases, there were parents working three or four shifts and they just couldn't find the way to get the child to school on time because they were working so much to just meet their families needs and now it was just simply a case of trying to find another parent at that school who could help out with getting the child there.

We make no presumptions about what's going on but if we do feel the need to intervene, we would press it as a whole family issue and not just one child's issue, assess and then get the service delivery in place. I want to bring this to Boston to just one school and let's see what happens because if we can change truancy at one school, we will look at spreading it and if we can change truancy as an issue here in Boston, the repercussions and how that will change everything else that ripples out from that. We open up pathways and opportunities for that child, that sixth grader, that kindergartener. If we can create a future for that child by keeping them in school, we also affect some of those safety and public health issues that always come back to haunt us.

I just want to get this in one school in one city and see if it works but that's really the key thing I've been working on. I'm working on a number of environmental initiatives and if you go to my website www.connollyforboston.com you can read about my Green agenda that I filed in council as well. This truancy is really the issue for me as a former teacher number one.

I'll just say this in closing, I really appreciate your time today. I'm the farthest thing from being a public health expert you could be entering office but I've had the greatest opportunity in representing this whole city and travelling across it to just dig in and read everything I can about public health and meet with everybody I can about public health issues particularly when I go out and see community health centers I learn so much and I know none of this is any news to you but for me learning over this past

year, we need to put more emphasis on it in government and as elected officials to say, “Hey, do you see what’s going on out there? Do you see what it says about our society”. And while we’ve made so much progress we still have just staggering failures on public health issues. We need to raise the fluency of elected officials around public health.

So I thank you for what you do because I know you go out there everyday and work at direct service level attacking health disparities trying to raise the quality of health and quality of life for individuals.

When you talk about public health issues, you’re invariably talking about education and when you talk about public safety issues, you’re invariably also talking about public health issues. We need to see that as elected public officials that every major public policy issue we have. I hope you won’t hesitate to call me or email when when you think there is something I to know about on any issue about public health in particular to the Boston residents in the room.

I’m also there for your bread and butter needs. When your recycling bin has gone missing, or your tree needs trimming on that public street or you need that tree replaced, or that pot whole covered. That’s what I’m there for.

Thank you very much for your time.

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