

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Regina Belen and I'm from West Hartford. I am writing to you today to express my opposition to H.B. 6439 and its pause of the ECS formula.

Over the last 12 months, we have watched our educators, parents, and students navigate distance and hybrid learning during the global COVID-19 pandemic. We have seen the struggles they face, struggles that have only exacerbated the inequities within Connecticut's public school system. We know how difficult it has been for districts that do not have adequate resources to educate their students amid a pandemic, and we know that equitably funding our districts is critical to the success of our students and communities, now more than ever.

Inequities persist because towns have had to meet the needs of their students out of their own pockets. Of course the towns who don't have the financial means to do this have schools where students don't get what they need to succeed, causing students to fall further behind academically. The towns that seem to have deeper pockets, like West Hartford, are forced to rely more on the community to make up this difference, even though demographics have been shifting and the community isn't what it used to be and may not be as able financially to step up.

Pausing the ECS phase-in for two years will do a great disservice to our students, particularly those who have additional learning needs. While districts that have a small population of high-need students might be able to survive the phase-in pause, districts with a large population of students with greater learning needs will suffer.

Over the last 12 months, the vast funding inequities that have always existed in Connecticut's public schools have been highlighted. While some students are thriving, others are barely surviving.

More than ever, communities require greater resources to meet the needs of their students and they cannot wait for ECS dollars to resume being phased in two years later. We need to continue to use the ECS formula and must fully fund the formula now so our students have immediate access to the resources they desperately need.

I understand these extraordinary times have impacted our state's budget, but our students have been demonstrating such resilience and dedication in these same extraordinary times. The federal money from the Elementary & Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund should be used to provide more social-emotional supports and resources to our students — not used in place of properly funding the ECS formula.

It's our responsibility to ensure our children are continuously being educated and funded equitably and based on their needs. It is unconscionable for us to even consider pausing funding based on student need, especially when S.B. 948, currently before the Education Committee, prioritizes fully and equitably funding districts based on the needs of our students, has the potential to close Connecticut's racial funding gap by 68%, and will make a real, tangible, and an immediate difference for our students.

Our students cannot keep waiting for the funding they need to learn. Turning a 10-year phase-in

plan into a 12-year phase-in plan guarantees that a second-grade student will not experience a fully-funded education until they are a year shy of graduating high school. This is frankly unacceptable. The financial stability of a state should never come at the expense of our children's education.

I am urging you to reject the governor's proposed budget as it stands and consider the needs of our students as you craft a revised budget. It is past time we put them at the forefront of the conversation.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Regina Belen