

Testimony Regarding H.B. No. 6439

March 9, 2021

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Rachel Chaleski. I am a Danbury resident with two children in the Danbury Public Schools. I also serve on the Danbury Board of Education; however, I do not speak on behalf of the Board today.

Four years ago, I wrote to this committee to advocate for a fair and equitable education funding system for all school types, as well as to make you aware that a group of residents in our community had been working to bring the Danbury Prospect Charter School to our city.

Since then, a new funding formula was implemented. Although imperfect, it was a step in the right direction towards equitably funding traditional neighborhood schools. For districts like ours in Danbury that have been underfunded for years, with a steady increase in our student population and rising high levels of high-needs students, a ten-year phase-in of a new ECS formula did not make much business sense, but it brought some incremental financial relief as well the expectation of eventual full funding. A freeze in this progression is a step in the wrong direction, especially when S.B. 948, currently before the Education Committee, prioritizes our neediest Districts by fully and equitably funding students based on need.

Due to our size and limited space and resources, Danbury has only just begun to open its school buildings to a portion of students in a Hybrid model since initially closing last March. This past year has not only weighed on students' academic performance, but also on their social-emotional and mental well-being. I watched as my own two children secluded themselves for hours on end, every day for almost one year, as they learned behind a computer screen. Our students not only need academic intervention, but also social emotional supports for all that happened and didn't happen for them this past year. Districts should not be expected to use one-time federal funds to supplant operational budgets. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund should be used as intended to respond to the pandemic, to address learning loss, for social-emotional recovery, and to reopen schools.

Danbury also withstands an additional inequity compared to other Alliance Districts as it is the only large city in the state without a charter school. In 2018, after the rigorous application process in response to the State Department of Education's Request for Proposal, the State Board of Education voted overwhelmingly to approve the charter for the operation of Danbury Prospect Charter School. Not only would funding this school provide much-needed space, but the main purpose of all Connecticut charter schools is to help to raise student achievement in the lowest-performing districts.

Just recently, a generous local donor offered a \$25MM gift to build the charter school in our downtown area, a significant cost savings to both local and state budgets. In comparison and according to the Governor's proposed budget, the expansion of the Open Choice program would cost ~\$2MM to send 50 Danbury students to other towns, whereas it would cost ~\$1.2MM to open a new school in the heart of Danbury for 100 students in its first year.

I urge you to reject the governor's proposed budget as it stands. Our students deserve, now more than ever, for our state leaders to put politics and ideologies aside. Please consider a revised budget that puts students first and creates immediate and long-term change to address all of their needs.

Thank you for your time,

Rachel Chaleski