

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Claudio Melendez-Cooper, and I am from Waterford in Southeastern Connecticut. I write 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. The impacts to education as a result of the pandemic have not been equally distributed across the State. We know that lower-income areas and areas with higher numbers of English-learners have had a harder time transitioning to remote learning. Connecticut recognized—with our current formula—the need to provide additional funding for these high-need students. The additional funding needed to provide the necessary resources for these students to receive a quality education has now increased. And yet the bill proposes a pause in the ECS formula phase-in, delaying this much-needed funding.

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. These districts are generally the most reliant on state aid and have a long history of being underfunded. The added pressures of increased need and stagnating fiscal support will have a deleterious effect on kids in these districts.

It is no secret that Connecticut's public schools are deeply racially and economically segregated. There is a \$639 million funding gap between Connecticut districts that serve student populations that are majority white versus those that serve a majority BIPOC population. The impact of this gap has only become more apparent over the last year, and we cannot keep perpetuating it by postponing ECS funding. We owe it to all of our students, but especially our students of color, to do everything in our power to close the funding gap as soon as possible.

I understand that these extraordinary times have impacted our state's budget, but our students have been demonstrating such resilience and dedication in spite of the challenges. 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, based on need. It is unconscionable 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. S.B. 948 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 unacceptable. Critics may bemoan the cost of providing the formulaically derived funds to school districts,

believing that it threatens the financial stability of the State. This thinking is shortsighted. The financial savings from not fully-funding our educational system is akin to the financial savings from shortchanging the pension systems: ruinous in the long-term. There are real fiscal costs to having chronically underfunded educational systems for certain populations. Poor educational outcomes result in lower wages, worse health outcomes, higher crime rates, and elevated rates of unemployment. Furthermore, the State suffers an opportunity cost by losing out on yet another generation of students from well-funded high-need districts. Funding our children's education isn't just the right thing to do. It is the pragmatic thing to do.

I am urging you to reject the governor's proposed budget 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,

Claudio Melendez-Cooper