

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Alissa O'Connell and I'm from the City of Danbury, CT. I am writing to you today to express my opposition to H.B. 6439 and its pause of the ECS formula.

Prior to the pandemic, I have watched Danbury struggle to meet the needs of our students and community with an underfunded budget. While many other districts have declining enrollment, Danbury is increasing. We also have an ever-increasing number of English-language learners and children requiring special education services. We also have a set of high-achieving learners preparing to join the community as wonderful, intelligent citizens - Danbury has included the finalized ECS funding model into its plans to help all of these children. It is unethical and inequitable to modify these plans by delaying the ECS funding.

Over the last 12 months, we have tried to navigate distance and hybrid learning during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Many struggles have surfaced, struggles that have only exacerbated the inequities within Connecticut's public school system. We know how difficult it has been for districts like ours that do not have adequate resources to educate their students normally and amid a pandemic, this has only been exacerbated. Equitably funding of our districts is critical to the success of our students and it is needed, NOW.

My husband, a cancer biologist, and myself, a small business owner, have been hit hard by the pandemic. He has been working from home amidst the chaos and I have had to cancel all of my work for the year. Since my business cannot run during a public health emergency, I have been home to help my children during their year of distance learning. Most families are not this 'lucky.' I have listened to teachers attempt to teach and reach children who cannot sit on a screen for hours on end, children who have non-English speaking parents helping them, children who have grandparents who lack in tech knowledge trying to help them, and those who they simply cannot get to 'turn on their screen.' I have watched my children, at different ages, miss the wonderful aspects of learning that grab you and reel you in. It is something, to spend your parental life trying to keep kids off a screen, only to have them be a slave to it for an entire year. To watch them go downhill in knowledge and learning, is frankly, heartbreaking.

We have only just started hybrid school in Danbury a few weeks ago. The reason we could not and cannot have in-person schooling for our kids was due to a lack of space, high enrollment, and a lack of teachers and staff to accommodate all the needs of our kids and the requirements of the pandemic. The reason for the lack of these resources is due to the severe and continued underfunding of our community and schools over the last years. It is beyond measure, that this administration would even consider delaying the ECS formula for our district and others like it which have already been disenfranchised. Our kids and our community strive towards great things - my kids deserve exactly what every other district has and has had for years.

Districts with high learning need are particularly affected by the proposed ECS pause. 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 mitigate our learning losses now. 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.

Education is not the place to find money for other items in the budget. Education is the only thing ensuring the success of our kids and why should these kids, who have been through enough, have to wait another minute. 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. Using these monies will also be disastrous to district finances.

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, my son currently, will not experience a fully-funded education until they are a year shy of graduating high school. This is unacceptable. He wants to become a scientist and our school currently lacks the supplies of him to learn these topics - does this seem like the best idea? To delay the future of our future tax-payers? 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,
Alissa O'Connell