

**Testimony in Opposition to  
H.B. 6439, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium  
Ending June 30, 2023, and Making Appropriations Therefor**

Nathan Quesnel  
Superintendent, East Hartford Public Schools

Chairwomen Osten and Walker, Ranking Members Miner and France, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in opposition to H.B. 6439 and Governor Lamont's proposal to pause the phase-in of the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula. My name is Nathan Quesnel and I have had the honor and privilege of serving as superintendent for East Hartford Public Schools for over nine years. As you may be aware, and as a context setting point, East Hartford is an Alliance District as well as a Priority School District. Sixty-one percent of our students are economically disadvantaged and 14 percent are English Learners. Our community is one of the 15 most fiscally and economically distressed municipalities in Connecticut.

While I fully recognize the complexity of the budget process, I was disheartened to see the proposed "pause" of the 2017 bi-partisan Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula that was designed to phase in equitable and adequate financial support for Alliance Districts. Specifically, I am concerned about the discontinuation of the planned and published increases to the Alliance Grants that our district has collectively depended on to fund vital and necessary services to students. To be clear, this "pause," will result in the loss of over \$103M, for all Alliance districts and nearly \$6.2M for East Hartford. While the recent infusion of funding through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergence Relief Fund (ESSER II) certainly complicates the states funding intentions, I would respectfully ask you to consider the points below as you continue to shape the budget process:

- **Regression from Equity Principles:** The bi-partisan formula designed to address the ECS grant was created with a clear-eyed understanding that schools centered in fiscally-challenged communities required a state funding commitment to address a persistent state achievement gap. As such, this formula represented a monumental equity step forward for Connecticut education funding from which the recommended pause retreats. If Connecticut is going to remain true to the principle that all children deserve the right to an equitable and excellent education, maintaining this phase in approach is critical to our state. In addition, it should be noted that several small, rural Alliance districts in Connecticut are scheduled to lose funding or have not received grant funding. While separate from your current budget plan, this inequity must be addressed.
- **Negation of ESSER II Intentions:** On January 28<sup>th</sup>, all Connecticut districts received guidance from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) describing the parameters of ESSER II allotments provided by the Federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act. This language included bold priorities of providing academic support, addressing learning loss, strengthening family connections, promoting social and emotional learning, and enhancing technology/infrastructure systems. In this same communication, direct mention was made of eligible activities to address the needs of students and staff as well as address infrastructure needs/concerns. We support these priorities as vital and necessary steps for our school districts to engage in if we are going to speedily recover and heal from the learning losses experienced in our collective battle against COVID-19. However, your plan to "pause" current increases to our Alliance Grant funds restricts the ability to address these needs and funnels one-time federal monies away from their intended use. As such, we urge you to recognize that

supplanting the planned Alliance Grant increase with one-time federal funds limits our ability to use the funding as originally intended.

- **Creation of Significant Fiscal Cliff:** In addition to the value and structural issues listed above, the proposal to use one-time federal ESSER II dollars to address a state funding obligation creates a future onerous structural deficit for state and local budgets. By “pausing” the ECS increase formula and supplanting this phase in approach with funds not intended for general budget activities, Connecticut adopts a financial strategy that will create large scale disruptions for fiscal year 2024. As districts attempt to mitigate large financial shortfalls that the suggested use of this one-time funding will create, they will be faced with three untenable options: 1) place inordinate demands on economically challenged municipalities that have little to no ability to offer additional funding; 2) seek massive increases in state aid; or 3) reduce and decimate the programs that were built to support the students that need them most. As such, we urge you to reconsider this strategy and reinstate the original phase-in schedule for all Alliance Districts. This shift will allow us to fund our general budget obligations, help cushion distressed municipalities from large tax increases, and avoid utilizing one-time federal funding intended for COVID-related purposes to fund ongoing operations.

Understanding the challenges listed above and taking this argument one step further, I ask that you revisit Connecticut’s strategy for guaranteeing an equitable and adequate educational experience for every child. While financial obstacles remain to be negotiated, **nine years is far too long for our students to wait** to receive the funding they need and deserve. Our elementary school students should not have to wait until they’re about to graduate high school to receive a properly funded education. As such, I ask the Committee to not only reject the governor’s proposal to pause the ECS phase-in, but to support a fully-funded, equitable, and student-centered funding system like S.B. 948 would create.

S.B. 948, which is currently before the Education Committee, would fully fund all districts, increase and expand the formula’s English Learner and concentrated poverty weights, and mitigate enrollment volatility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I ask that you consider these important and necessary changes as you craft your budget.

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on H.B. 6439 and the importance of a fully and equitably funded ECS formula.

Sincerely,

Nathan Quesnel  
Superintendent, East Hartford Public Schools