



Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, Ed.D.
Superintendent

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

March 9, 2021

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

In regard to H.B. 6439, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023, and Making Appropriations Therefor, **I write in opposition to the proposal to pause the scheduled increases to Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grants - a step that would further delay achieving equity for students in Connecticut.** In 2017, the General Assembly approved a plan to phase in increases to ECS grants over the next several years, a necessary step to improving student outcomes and ensuring equity in school funding across our state. Reneging on this commitment should not be an option. School districts, including Hartford, have begun budgeting for the future based on these approved increases, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our students only makes this funding more urgent. Therefore, the only options that should be considered are upholding the commitment the General Assembly made to our students, or accelerating the phase-in as proposed in other legislation.

Instead of pausing the approved increases to ECS grants, **I ask this committee to strongly consider supporting and adopting the ideas presented in S.B. 948, An Act Addressing Education Funding and Racial Equity in Connecticut.** While our State has taken steps in recent years to address the issues that exist in our education finance system, the reality is that this system is still not equitable. As a result of longstanding, systemic inequity, students in districts like Hartford simply do not have the same access to resources that other students do across the state. The School & State Finance Project recently conducted an analysis that found a \$639 million funding gap in Connecticut between districts serving majority White student populations and all other districts. Sadly, this study simply quantified what we on the ground in Hartford already knew, and face every day.

S.B. 948 helps create a truly student-centered funding system that provides equitable funding for all Connecticut students regardless of their race, level of need, or the city or town they live in. First, **this bill would fully fund districts beginning in FY 2022**, rather than forcing students to wait until 2028 to receive the support that the General Assembly has already determined they need.

Next, **S.B. 948 would increase the ECS weights for English Learners and students in districts with concentrated poverty**, a step that would make a significant difference in the lives of many Hartford students. Hartford Public Schools serves a community of concentrated poverty and is currently home to approximately 4,000 English Learners, representing about 22% of the district's total population. By increasing the weights for these students, the General Assembly will finally be recognizing that these student populations have higher levels of need and require more support from their school districts than students from more affluent communities. Hartford Public Schools provides free or reduced lunch to all of our students, and provides a significant number of out-of-classroom supports to our students. These vital services increase our per-pupil costs and, therefore, per-pupil spending equality does not produce equity in student outcomes -- S.B. 948 recognizes and addresses this.



Finally, **this bill would mitigate the volatility in student enrollment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic** by using the greater of October 2019 or October 2020 student data for FY 2022 grants. This measure would bring necessary stability and predictability in our funding through these tumultuous and unprecedented times.

These proposed changes to the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula in S.B. 948 would reduce Connecticut's racial funding gap by 68 percent and invest \$445 million more in K-12 public education. This is the type of bold, transformative action the General Assembly needs to take to ensure that all students in Connecticut are receiving the resources and support they need and deserve.

As we begin to assess and understand the long-term negative impacts caused and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, now is the time for the General Assembly to double down on its commitment to creating an equitable school financing system that equips all districts with the funding and resources necessary to prepare our children for the future. Adopting the provisions contained in S.B. 948 would be an important step in achieving that goal, and I ask all members of this committee for their support.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice my concerns regarding H.B. 6439 and my support for the proposals in S.B. 948. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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