



Testimony Education Committee

HB 7270, An Act Concerning The Education Cost Sharing Formula for Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2018, and June 20, 2019

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Good evening, members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Steven Adamowski, I serve as superintendent of the City of Norwalk Public Schools. I'm here today to offer some thoughts for your consideration on the method for determining Education Cost Sharing grants that would increase equity for our students. I want to start with a little background on my city and its schools.

Unlike most of our neighbors in Fairfield County, as the state's 6th largest city, Norwalk is an urban school system. In the Strategic Operating Plan adopted by the Board of Education last year, our vision is to become "The Most Successful City School District in Connecticut." To do that, we are implementing ambitious plans to raise achievement for all students and to close achievement gaps, an accomplishment that will reflect positively not just on Norwalk, but on the entire state. Equitable funding is necessary for all our students to be successful.

One of the many strengths our city offers is its diversity, a fact reflected in the school population, which is 67% minority; 41% of our students speak a second language at home, including Spanish, Haitian Creole, Polish, Greek, several Indian dialects, and Arabic; 15% of Norwalk's 11,500 students (1,791) are English Language Learners, which carries extra educational needs, costs and opportunities.

This is a thriving city, and we are proud to be one of the very few growing school districts in the state. That has also brought some challenges, as our school buildings are now operating at 110% of capacity. Last month alone, Norwalk added 52 new students. We not only need to create additional schools for growing enrollment, we require adequate funding to educate more students.

The city also has significant educational need. Out of 11,500 Norwalk students, nearly 50% are eligible for free and reduced lunch; 57% of Norwalk students are classified by the State Department of Education in the "High Needs" category -- lower income, special education and English language learners.

The size and demographic profile of Norwalk is most similar to Danbury. Norwalk receives an ECS grant of \$11.2M, Danbury \$31.3M -- a difference of over \$20M. CCJEF estimated that Norwalk was underfunded by \$23M on the basis of student need.

With property value as its driving force, the existing ECS formula penalizes Norwalk for its location. While the city has relatively higher property values due to its location in Fairfield County, the median income of Norwalk residents is 107 out of 169 towns, close to the bottom third in the state and well below that of wealthy neighboring towns. This disparity has long resulted in inequitable funding for Norwalk schools, and a disproportionate tax burden on residents.

Connecticut needs a more accurate and fairer measure to define a community's education need when it comes to school funding.

As you seek a better balance between assessed valuation (property wealth) and poverty (income), I ask that you keep in mind other innovative ideas and proposals that would contribute to a more equitable system of education funding. One of these is the proposal made by Representatives Morris and Wilms to create a "tiered" system of education foundation funding based on State District Reference Groups, in which districts of similar socioeconomic status are grouped together. That means Norwalk is not compared to its geographic neighbors in Group A, which include wealthy towns like Darien, Wilton and Westport, but rather with cities of comparable socioeconomic profile in Group H -- Stamford, Danbury, Meriden, East Hartford, West Haven, Ansonia and Derby.

There are also aspects of the Governor's budget which contribute to equity. One of these is the provision that accounts for annual enrollment gains and losses. Logically, districts that are growing should get additional funding to educate additional students while the funds of districts with declining enrollment are redistributed.

In Norwalk, 15% of students receive special education services at a cost of 24% of the school system's annual operating budget. Like so many other districts, funding for special education is a significant concern for us. Connecticut is one of only a handful of states without a separate state system for supporting special education. A system that ensures adequate funding for students with special needs benefits all students. The Governor's proposal is a step in the right direction in how Connecticut funds special education and helps bring stability to a system that is inherently unpredictable. In the short-term, I hope that adjustments to the ECS formula made in this session will contain a similar provision for English language learners.

Ultimately, I hope that school finance reform in Connecticut will take the form of funding every child according to need and enabling those funds to follow the child to the school their parent chooses.

However, the need to further study and fundamentally redesign should not get in the way of making some changes now that would make the ECS more equitable. Students in communities such as Norwalk deserve movement on this long-standing problem in this current session.

Thank you for your consideration and your hard work in addressing this critical issue.