

**Testimony to the Education Committee in support of HB 7348 that
provides funding for After School Programs.
Submitted by: Chris George, Executive Director of IRIS, Integrated
Refugee and Immigrant Services
(Formerly Interfaith Refugee Ministry)**

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My name is Chris George. I am the Executive Director of IRIS, Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services, in New Haven. I urge you to support House Bill 7348 that would increase funding for after school programs. The IRIS after school program at the East Rock Global Magnet school in New Haven helps more than 50 immigrant and refugee children become better students and contributes to closing Connecticut's achievement gap.

Through homework help, English language instruction, class projects, civics training, and attention to cultural adjustment issues, this special program -- run by IRIS, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (formerly IRM, Interfaith Refugee Ministry) -- has been helping new American students for more than three years. After school instruction with one-on-one tutoring is the best way to help non native English speakers catch up to other students and excel in school.

Refugees (invited by the federal government to come to the US) and immigrants arrive in Connecticut with enormous needs. Refugee children in particular are ill prepared for formal education; one out of three has never attended a school. Most have no English language skills. Cultural differences and separation from their home countries compound the difficulties refugees face integrating into US society.

Currently, children who do not know how to hold a pencil, write in a notebook, or solve basic math problems are placed in schools with little or no support. Many refugee children arrive with psychosocial issues including war trauma, educational neglect, and effects of violence, bad nutrition or health neglect. These students urgently need the kind of supplemental support that an after school program provides. The results are striking; students show dramatic improvement and the teachers and administration are overwhelmingly supportive.

Girls in particular are often kept from participating in activities because family resources are scarce and traditional parents often place strict limitations on their daughters' social interactions. Their parents trust an after school program run by a culturally sensitive refugee resettlement agency such as IRIS.

Although federal funding for the after school program ended more than a year ago, IRIS continued with a reduced schedule, a core of committed teachers, a team of enthusiastic volunteers, and with limited private funding.

In light of the increasing number of immigrant families in New Haven, IRIS has recently expanded the after school program, but it needs more funding.

Thank you for your support.

Public Hearing Testimony Speaker:

Chris George

Date:

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