

New Haven Public Schools

March 2, 2009

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE FINANCE, REVENUE AND COMMITTEE ON H.B. No. 6556, AN ACT CONCERNING FUNDING OF SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS.

Senator Daily, Representative Staples and members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee, I am Susan Weisselberg, school construction coordinator for New Haven Public Schools, speaking on behalf of New Haven Superintendent of Schools Dr. Reginald Mayo for House Bill No. 6556.

We have the largest school construction program in the State, having opened 29 schools since 1998, with five more in construction, three in design and one in planning. We have rebuilt our schools to provide an improved learning environment and, as evidenced by our State Cambridge Evaluation Report last February, our many efforts to improve academic performance in conjunction with the school buildings are bearing fruit.

A key component in our construction and improvement plans has been to convert nearly all our elementary and middle schools to K-8 and pre-K-8 schools, generally at two classes per grade. We did this to promote stability for our students and families. Much of our school population is mobile within the city, but the students can choose to stay in their home school, which provides consistency for the school and the families.

Our challenges are great and, in New Haven, we believe your money has been well spent. We have had major gains in State mastery test scores across the board at all levels, including many double digit increases at many schools. These gains continue the momentum and steady gains across the district, and we continue to work with the State and others on our District Plan of Improvement. We want to close our achievement gap and we need your help.

We are here today to speak in favor of section 3 of HB 6556. That section acknowledges the current conflict in the statutes between efforts to improve achievement under state and federal law and efforts to rebuild schools.

We ask that you favor efforts to improve achievement and help us on technical provisions in the school construction statutes that make conversions to K-8 schools more difficult for school districts.

Highest Projected Enrollment – Phase In

Section 3(a) gives school districts a longer period of time to reach their highest projected enrollment, which is key when, as in New Haven, we phase in our grades to convert from an elementary school to a K-8 school one grade at a time. Importing many students in grades 6-8 to hasten a conversion does not work academically; our experience is that it is far better for students, teachers

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and administrators for the students to advance grade by grade rather than import the students. This takes a little time, especially if a school does not open until 6-7 years after the application to the State. We want to do it right, as we have found that the K-8 model provides greater opportunities for success by building relationships with parents, staff and students over a course of nine years. Transitions to K-8 schools also provide internal accountability by enhancing teacher collaboration and articulation within and across grades.

Class Size for School Districts in Need of Improvement

Section 3(a) also permits school construction projects where school districts have schools in need of improvement to reduce their class size by 20%. This links to the school improvement plan filed with the State Department of Education and tracking data on student achievement. Class size alone does not determine a student's success but we certainly find that it helps. We filed for a number of our school construction projects in the years predating the No Child Left Behind Act, and we utilized the class size maximum of 26 or 27 per our teacher contract in doing so. We find that class sizes less than that do work better for students. We have had to cut back the number of paraprofessionals assisting teachers in the lower grades, and we certainly cannot afford a second certified teacher in each classroom in the lower grades – so a smaller class size helps the students focus with fewer distractions. (Of course, we also have implemented a variety of interventions, many of which are listed below.) This provision directly links the class size reduction and the building project to the school improvement plan, which provides for accountability by the school districts.

Federal and Private Grants

Some school districts are able to obtain federal and private grants. Under current law, only the State benefits as those grant proceeds are deducted from the State's share of a project. Section 3(b)(2)(B) anticipates possible federal stimulus funds or other grants and splits the proceeds between the State and a school district.

State Space Standards for K-8 Schools

Finally, Section 3(b)(4) provides for an adjustment in the space standards for K-8 schools. A number of school districts are shifting away from the elementary and middle school model back to K-8 (and pre-K-8) schools. The State Standard Space Specifications, which are attached, are several decades old and do not factor in K-8 schools, which provide many middle-school type spaces but are weighted to give less square feet per student to students in many of the younger grades. Ultimately they discriminate against K-8 schools, particularly those with two classes per grade, as there is not enough enrollment in each of those schools to overcome the formula. Yet, smaller schools and smaller class sizes are often key to overcoming the achievement gap in urban school districts. We have found that in our K-8 schools, standard classrooms are only 23% - 30% of the square footage and the remaining space is allocated to many other uses, as outlined below.

K-8 and pre-K-8 schools must provide a range of spaces to service students of different sizes and need in those grade ranges. In a two-class per grade model, which New Haven and some other districts are following, the "Space Standards" in the regulations end up penalizing those districts because the schools are proportionally smaller in terms of enrollment, at c. 500-540 rather than the 700+ students in a three-class per grade model. The Space Standards, by weighting the average grades and spaces for the smaller children who actually are given less space in those standards, hurt schools where academically it is better to have an enrollment at two classes per grade. A space standard of 165 square feet per student for K-8 schools accommodates the extra spaces necessary for the varied populations (guidance, science labs, literacy intervention programs, gyms, media center changes, in-school suspension, etc.). While this means that some schools in some districts would not be penalized for exceeding space standards for their

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enrollments in an audit situation, the fiscal impact would be spread out over a number of years, as audits occur after school projects are completed and closed out.

If the applicable language in HB 6556 is too specific, another approach would be to word changes to 10-286(b)(4) as follows:

(4) Commencing with the school construction projects authorized by the General Assembly during the fiscal year ending June 30, 1985, and for all such projects so authorized thereafter, the calculation of grants pursuant to this section shall be made in accordance with the state standard space specifications in effect at the time of the final grant calculation, except that on and after July 1, 2005, in the case of a school district with an enrollment of less than one hundred fifty students in grades kindergarten to grade eight, inclusive, state standard space specifications shall not apply in the calculation of grants pursuant to this section and the Commissioner of Education may modify the standard space specifications for a project in such district, and except that in the case of a school with students in grades kindergarten to grade eight, inclusive, state standard space specifications applied in the calculation of grants pursuant to this section shall be those applied to grades five through eight.

As further background, please understand that capacities in buildings have changed over the years. For example, a hypothetical elementary school built in c. 1925 with a 1950s addition, with 30 students per classroom, a multi-purpose room, a library and an administrative area, could house a total of 600 students. The same building, with enrollments of 26 or 27 students in each classroom, could house 537 students. The same building with several classrooms converted, one for self-contained special education, one for a resource room and storage, and one for special services, could house 471 students. The same building updated for program needs, such as a health suite, computer area, cafeteria, and literacy, could house 257 students. And, there can be additional changes; the new technology utilized requires more space for data closets and high performance buildings now use more spaces for mechanical and electrical equipment.

Clearly, buildings have changed over the years, not only with air conditioning and “connectivity” but with different science labs, art and music spaces, and a wide range of support needs and spaces. In New Haven, we have spaces that can serve several purposes and needs, but are not the 1950s multi-purpose room that is a gym, cafeteria and auditorium all in one. Our buildings do not put art and music back on a cart and science simply in kits. Our pre-K-8 program provides a full-sized gym, which can be divided for two simultaneous physical education classes or activities or can be used as one large space. Our library/media centers have furnishings and spaces for larger students and smaller ones. Many of the schools have school-based health centers. They have support spaces so that students and parents now have privacy when meeting with social workers and school psychologists and other support service providers, who previously were relegated to such inadequate spaces as hallways and basements. We have resource rooms for pull-out services and some spaces for reading intervention programs. Our schools are 21st century facilities used by the entire K-8 student population. Many of these features are expected when a school undergoes accreditation review. Schools which are funded by State and local taxpayers should be expected to include 21st century facilities – but a school district should not be penalized for building such schools as K-8 schools with two classes per grade.

The State Space Standards calculations were developed over 25 years ago. At that time, the standard grade level model was: Elementary Schools (K-5), Middle Schools (6-8) and High Schools (9-12). The shift to

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a K-8 model by New Haven and other urban school districts in the last dozen years, to provide a stronger educational experience for students, is not reflected in the existing Space Standards. Those standards

assume some of the spaces (full-sized gymnasium, wider hallways, larger cafeteria, instrumental music, science, portions of the library media center, and others) are used primarily by grades 7-8, when in fact they are used by virtually all of the school's population.

The average K-8 school falls within a projected enrollment of 351-750 students. For grades pre-K-4, the space standards allow for 120 square feet per student. This figure increases to 152 square feet per student for grades 5 and 6, and 176 square feet per student for grades 7 and 8. Overall, this results in an average allowable square foot per student of approximately 140 (see attached example).

Classrooms for the pre-K, K and grade 1 students generally need to be larger than for the upper grades because of the additional fixtures, furnishings and equipment that are legally required for these grades. Cubbies (in lieu of hallway lockers), multiple program areas, toilet facilities within the classroom and other items needed in these rooms are unique to these grades and do not appear in the upper grades. This results in classroom spaces of approximately 1,000 square feet or more by current design standards.

At most, only 30% of a two-class per grade typical K-8 school is devoted to general classroom areas. The balance of the building (70%) is support spaces for all occupants (i.e. circulation spaces, gym and related physical education support spaces, specialty art and music teaching spaces, cafeteria and related food service spaces, library and related media center spaces, administration spaces for teachers and staff, guidance and related counseling areas, offices, resource rooms, health suite spaces, toilet rooms, storage, mechanical and custodial spaces). The attached "block" graphic chart illustrates an example of the different spaces taken up by various components in a school educational program, demonstrating the amount of space devoted to general classroom areas for the new Bishop Woods School (540 students), which opens this summer. The change in Section 3 would reflect this reality.

We understand that we have provided you with more than you may have wanted to know about the State Standard Space Specifications, but it is an issue important not only to New Haven but many other school districts and we respectfully urge you to review our material and support this change. Thank you.

Additional Information About New Haven Public Schools:

Our school district's improvements are team efforts, for frequent student data assessments, academic interventions, curriculum development and implementation, professional development, tutoring, and classroom improvements. Our scores have improved. In December, two New Haven high schools were among just 16 high schools across Connecticut that were awarded US News & World Report's Silver designation, and one New Haven high school was among the five awarded a Bronze designation; all three are interdistrict magnet schools. And, John C. Daniels School of International Communication has been awarded the status of 2009 Magnet School of Excellence by Magnet Schools of America, which selects 75 magnet schools in the nation for this top category.

We cannot do it alone and we have much more to do. On the operating side, cuts in various grants will set us back. We will have to cut summer school programs and paraprofessionals and teachers and many of our support systems. We would love a longer school day in some of our lowest performing schools – we cannot afford it now and will never be able to afford it with cuts in the general fund. We understand that and are not asking this Committee to restore those cuts. We are asking you to understand that our efforts to rebuild our schools link with all our other efforts and are important to our improvements.

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- 20,000 students attend New Haven Public Schools; 1,987 of these students are from 30 towns; there are 17 interdistrict magnet schools, 4 intra-district magnets for New Haven students, and 3 lighthouse schools. A total of 7,325 students attend magnet schools in New Haven. We have nearly 7,000 applications for our magnet program; the lottery takes place this week.
- 23 of 31 schools are K-8 or pre-K-8. New Haven was #1 in its district reference group for the CMT in many areas, including math, reading and science. Grade to grade cohorts showed increases at every grade level in reading and math, and many schools had double digit gains.
- Nine schools made Safe Harbor; three of them were in Restructuring.
- We have a literacy and math coach in every school and they work with students and teachers in smaller group settings.
- Positive behavior support program is being piloted in five schools and the Comer School Reform model is being implemented in seven schools.
- Suspensions decreased by 1,228 students last year, the four-year dropout rate is 15.3% and school attendance is up.
- Curriculum is being strengthened as is work on effective use of instructional time.
- High schools posted the best gains in the district CAPT scores since the administration of CAPT began: 9% in reading and 11% in writing.
- Over 500 students took AP courses, with a 73% increase since 2003 for those scoring 3 or higher.
- There has been a 21 point increase in SAT scores since 2003. In 2008, 1,003 students graduated and 82.3% went on to 146 two- or four-year colleges. UCONN accepted 140 students.
- We have numerous partnerships with higher education institutions and others.
- New Haven is the largest school-based pre-school provider in the State and 79% of pre-school teachers have a 2-year college degree.
- The school construction program has resulted in 29 new and renovated schools opened since 1998 with five more in construction and four more in planning and design; they contribute to an improved learning environment, as noted in the Cambridge Report.
- State designation as the #1 Wellness Policy which reflects the Physical Activity and Wellness (PAW) programs (funded through private grants), and a variety of healthy education initiatives that are being employed across the District with our student population.
- Successful transition to in-house Food Service Program with dramatic transition in healthy menu choices for children, increased student participation and federal reimbursements and successful awards of numerous grants related to fresh fruits and vegetable and breakfast programs and recognitions for the efforts to increase healthy eating and awareness and decreasing obesity. Utilization of updated computerized systems to track purchasing and consumption which has served to more efficiently track costs and manage the system more effectively.

There is so much more we would like to do in every area, as we have so much work ahead of us. Strong leaders are needed at every school, and we must support the teachers in every classroom. Our assessments are helping, and so is professional development. We see more interventions as key tools to success, linked with our other efforts. Our families are increasingly stressed as the economic situation worsens, and people look to the schools to teach children and to provide activities, daytime into evening and throughout the year. Schools alone cannot provide all the answers but funding cuts make our job that much harder.

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Education funding cuts often result in a disparate, negative impact on poorer urban school districts, while pressure continues on us to close the achievement gap. We want to continue to improve – dramatically so – and cannot do so without State support. Thank you.

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From the State Department of Education's Current Regulations:

Sec. 10-287c-15. Standards (Reference: Section 10-283a)

(a) **State standard space specifications.** The standard space specifications identified in this section shall apply to all school building project grants except code and health violations, roof replacements, site acquisitions, site improvements, leasing projects, plant purchases, vocational agriculture equipment, and administrative facilities. For any building constructed prior to 1950, the standard space specifications identified in this section shall be increased by twenty-five per cent.

**State Standard Space Specifications
Grades**

Projected Enrollment	Pre-K and K	Allowable Square Footage per Pupil											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
0 - 350	124	124	124	124	124	156	156	180	180	180	194	194	194
351 - 750	120	120	120	120	120	152	152	176	176	176	190	190	190
751 - 1500	116	116	116	116	116	148	148	170	170	170	184	184	184
Over 1500	112	112	112	112	112	142	142	164	164	164	178	178	178

(1) These standards shall be used as maximums for grant computation purposes. The square footage per pupil allowances for all grades housed shall be summed and divided by the number of grades housed to determine a maximum square foot per pupil for the facility.

(2) Applicants for school building projects which exceed the state standard space specifications solely as a result of extraordinary programmatic needs may apply to the Commissioner, at such time and in such manner as the Commissioner may prescribe, for a waiver of space limitations.

Space Standards Specifications for an Enrollment of 540 Students

School Type	Pre-K & K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Avg	Allowable Area (sf)
K - 5	120	120	120	120	120	152	--	--	--	125.3	67,680
6 - 8	--	--	--	--	--	--	152	176	176	168.0	90,720
Pre-K - 8	120	120	120	120	120	152	152	176	176	139.6	75,360

Proposed PK-8 Space Standards Model

Since only 30% of any school is devoted to actual classroom space, the allowable area per student for a Pre-K - 8 school (139.6 s.f.) should only account for 30% of the allowable area. Since the inclusion of 7th & 8th graders causes an increase in support space needed, the allowable area per student for 7th & 8th graders (176 s.f.) should account for the remaining 70% that is devoted to support space.

	Allowable Area per Student	School Area Breakdown	Space Needed (Allowable Area x Breakdown)	Total Area Actually Needed for Pre-K - 8 School (Classroom + Support)	
				Per Student (sf)	Total (sf)
Pre-K - 8 Classroom Space	139.6	30%	41.9	165.1	89,143
7th & 8th Grader Support Space	176	70%	123.2		