

Testimony
Submitted to the
Education Committee
March 9, 2009

SENATE BILL NO. 830 AN ACT CONCERNING THE GOVERNOR'S
RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING EDUCATION

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey and Representative Fleishmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Eric Bernstein and I serve as the principal of the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts and the Greater Hartford Academy of Mathematics and Science, Interdistrict Magnet Schools operated by the Capitol Region Education Council. Accompanying me today is Executive Director of CREC Bruce Douglas and General Director of CREC Magnet Schools, Denise Gallucci.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Education Committee concerning proposed Senate Bill 830 – Concerning the Governor’s Recommendations Regarding Education. The success of Interdistrict Magnet Schools has relied on collaboration with and the support of our partner school districts. While those districts remain supportive and committed to our schools and the social justice that our schools help to ensure, the financial burden on those districts runs counter to their good intentions. I ask that the legislature facilitate these continued partnerships to the benefit of all of our young people by including the full state funding of magnet schools in the state budget.

In asking for full funding of magnet schools by the state, I would like to highlight three of the many ways that Interdistrict Magnet Schools enhance the educational opportunities of Connecticut students. First, magnet schools provide a diverse learning environment for all students in attendance. Second, magnet schools create economies of scale which facilitate the provision of distinctive course offerings that could not generate sufficient participation in a traditional, comprehensive high school. And third, magnet schools attract not only students, but unique opportunities for those students delivered by people and organizations that see a unique value in working with these diverse, theme-focused, schools.

When I speak with perspective students and families about what my two schools have to offer, the first point I focus on is the diversity. To be sure, I speak of diversity in terms of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. However, I also describe the geographic diversity and explain how every community has attributes that impact the citizens of that community and how, as students at the Arts or Math and Science Academies, you will be learning with peers from more than 50 different communities throughout the region, and beyond. Those peers will each bring unique and different perspectives. Beyond geographic diversity, I also describe the diversity of interests that students bring to the theme-focus of the schools. If you are a musician, you will study not only with other developing musicians, but with artistic peers that are creative writers, dancers, actors, and visual artists. In the math and science academy, you may

be deeply engaged in math, studying along-side peers with that same level of passion for biological research, physics, chemistry, or earth and space sciences. Why is all of this diversity so important? I quote NASA Rocket Scientist, Donner Grigsby, when he spoke with students at the Math and Science Academy last year. He explained that the most important skill you must have as a rocket scientist is not a firm understanding of thermo-dynamics or a complete grasp of quantum mechanics. More important is the ability to relate to and work with people that are different from you. He said that as a rocket scientist, you will work on many teams. There will already be one of you on those teams, so you need to be able to work with and value the other people on the team that are different from you.

Donner mentioned thermo-dynamics and quantum mechanics which lead me to the second distinct opportunity for students in magnet schools. At the Math and Science Academy, we offer both of those classes. We have a photonics class, a class on geohazards, and an advanced astronomy class. We teach two full years of math beyond Advanced Placement Calculus, including multivariable calculus and introduction to differential equations. The Arts Academy also has highly specialized courses including Advanced Playwriting, Codified Horton Movement Studies, Jazz Theory, Physical Approaches to Acting, and Puppetry. At both schools, these courses leverage the economies of scale that only a high concentration of young artists, mathematicians and scientists create. Classes that, in most traditional, comprehensive high schools would not even have one student able to enroll can run as full courses at a focused, theme-based interdistrict magnet school. Interdistrict magnet schools provide specialized, targeted, rigorous curriculum that meet the needs of all learners.

The metaphor of magnet schools is that the magnet theme attracts students with a particular interest. That metaphor of attraction extends beyond students, as well, with people and organizations outside the schools gravitating toward the magnet. Visiting artists, for example, are drawn to the Arts Academy because of the concentration of young artists with whom they can share their art forms. Robert Rivest, a well-known mime, actor Brian Dennehy, Barry Harris and George Coleman both internationally renowned jazz artists, Jermaine Jackson from the Jackson 5, Pilobolus Dance Theater, Elizabeth Roxas from the Ailey Dance Company and Jesse Young, an actor who was in the original company of Rent are among those visiting artists. Similarly, students at the Math and Science Academy have benefited from the attraction that many leaders in the STEM fields have felt. Among those leaders that have visited the Math and Science Academy have been Deep Sea Explorer, Dr. Robert Ballard, NASA Administrator, Dr. Adena Williams Loston, and astrophysicist Dr. Charles T. Liu. The students at the Math and Science Academy have also drawn the attention of senior management at Connecticut STEM companies, forging strong partnerships with Hamilton Sundstrand, Pratt and Whitney, Kaman Aerospace, Gerber Technologies, Computer Sciences Corp., and the Connecticut Technology Council. The diversity of students and the theme-focus at these magnet schools are what attract high caliber visiting artists, renowned scientists, and strong partnerships with industry and the arts community. The cycle

then continues, as these incredible, unique opportunities further enrich the education of the students at the schools.

Interdistrict Magnet Schools play a central role in the social justice of a high quality education for all students. Fully funding magnet schools is key to the successful pursuit of that critical mission and will ensure that the schools continue to be diverse learning communities that provide students with unique and rigorous educational experiences. I urge the committee to support a budget that includes full funding of interdistrict magnet schools and I thank the committee for the opportunity to share my views.