

Erika Haynes, Windham Town Council
Written Testimony
Education Committee Public Hearing
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I want to thank members of the Education Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 6385. My name is Erika Haynes and I am a member of the Windham Town Council.

House Bill 6385, An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor, recommends assembling a Task Force to study issues relating to our school funding system. I am encouraged that this Task Force represents a step towards action to fix a school funding system that we all know is broken. But I am afraid that this step does not go far enough.

The current system inconsistently funds students' learning needs and fails to accurately account for differences in towns' ability to pay for education locally. It is wasteful and inefficient. In these tough budget times, we cannot afford to keep spending our scarce education dollars this way—it has a devastating impact on districts and students.

For example, in Windham, my school district, a student only receives about \$7,400 in state aid. Meanwhile, similar students in New Haven receive \$9,000, and just under \$11,000 in Hartford. This is unfair and does not reflect the needs of Windham students: nearly 75 percent of Windham's students come from low-income families, and Windham has a low per-pupil tax base (about 24 percent of the state median). This makes no sense—it unfairly punishes students in my district and other districts around the state. Until we have a school funding system that accurately accounts for students and their needs in the schools they attend, we will not fix this problem.

Connecticut has a history of studying our school funding system without clear roadmaps for implementing solutions; the result is that we have delayed action time and time again while students continue to receive inadequate or arbitrary funding amounts. The Task Force proposed by House Bill 6385, by statute, does not require any action to even begin until after this legislative session is over. Our schools, districts and students deserve a genuine effort on the part of policymakers and all concerned THIS year to begin to articulate actionable solutions. We need to start a debate on specific legislative proposals now. My district and others have been told too many times that this challenge will be addressed “next year”—but we deserve the chance to move it forward as far as we possibly can this year. My district cannot wait any longer, and I think a debate on the issues at hand is not only possible, but necessary, this year.

With that said, if this Committee proceeds with House Bill 6385, I urge the governor to provide a clearer charge to the Task Force so that we don't waste yet another year studying the problem and failing to create an actionable solution. To be effective, the Task Force needs to be charged with creating a solution that funds students consistently and provides extra funds for students with extra learning needs at whatever public school they actually attend across all districts in our state. The Task Force also needs to devise a solution that accurately accounts for town wealth, consolidates disparate funding streams into one coherent system, and encourages transparency and efficiency. Fundamentally, this Task Force must work towards a new system that puts

students at the center of our education funding decisions. Without such direction, I fear that the governor's goal of arriving at an acceptable solution to the shortcomings of our current funding system will not be met.

Finally, I urge the governor to expand membership of the Task Force proposed by House Bill 6385 to include more perspectives of districts across our state, such as mine, and to add additional expertise on school funding. One representative each from a small, medium, and large district is not sufficient to incorporate the diverse perspectives of the nearly 170 school districts in Connecticut. In assembling this Task Force we need to be sure we look beyond the cast of characters representing those who have, to date, not yet been able to develop an actionable solution to this most pressing problem.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit testimony about House Bill 6385. Our system is systematically failing far too many Connecticut students. They can't wait any longer, and neither should we. I urge the Committee to consider more immediate action to begin replacing our broken school funding system with a more efficient, rational system that that funds students based on their learning needs at the public schools they actually attend.