

Testimony on H.B. No. 6385

Submitted by Wendy Lecker

February 23, 2011

Chairperson Stillman, Chairperson Fleischmann and Members of the Education Committee:

I am co-president of Stamford's Parent-Teacher Council, which represents parents and the fifteen thousand students in Stamford's twenty public schools. We are thankful for the Governor's commitment to maintain current levels of ECS funding. I am writing to urge you not to reduce the Priority School District grant. The Priority School District grants enable Stamford's schools to provide indispensable services to our neediest children. In this period of economic distress, our public schools are seeing more and more needy children. This need, coupled with decreased local funding, makes Priority School District funding even more vital.

Stamford's Demographics and Stamford's Needs

In order to understand the importance of the Priority School District grant to the children of Stamford, it is important to give you an idea of the changes our district has undergone in the past ten years. Since the 2001-02 school year, the number of ELL students increased by 873. This is an increase of 75%. The percentage of school children in Stamford living in poverty has risen from 28.3% TO 40% in the past ten years. This represents an increase of almost 12%.

Stamford's school population has become more economically and ethnically diverse over the past ten years- and we celebrate that diversity. These children are all our children and it is our constitutional and moral responsibility to make sure each and every one receive a quality education that, at the very least, meets state standards.

Inadequate State Funding

Despite Stamford's increased need, despite the fact that over 40% of our children live in poverty and about 37% of our children come from homes where English is not the first language, our city receives only about \$500 per student in ECS funding from the State. The median allocation in Stamford's DRG, DRG H, is over 10 times that amount, or \$5,170.

The current economic situation in our city will most likely result in more needy children in our school system. Parent volunteers routinely spend several days before February break packing up bags of food, donated by our families, for our students who might otherwise not have a meal over the vacation. We expect this need to increase as the economic woes spread. We can only do so much as volunteers. We parents cannot

provide the extra educational services, extra teachers, extra hours and special programs, needed to raise achievement; and \$500 per student will not provide those services either.

The Cost of Education

In order to provide all of our children with the opportunity to meet state standards, our schools need more resources than they have needed in the past. Educational cost studies and funding formulas across this country consistently show that it costs as much as **two times** as much to educate a child living in poverty to meet state standards as it does to educate a child with no needs. The same holds true for English Language Learners – the cost can be from **1.5 - 2 times** the cost of a child with no needs. [1]

Yet we know that the weights in our ECS formula do not adequately reflect the cost of educating children in poverty and ELL students. We know the foundation level, while it was raised, is not based on any assessment of what it costs to educate a child. In addition, we know that the measure of income wealth is outdated.

School Funding and Achievement

Experience in other states that have truly reformed their school funding formulas proves that providing extra resources to children in need, in the amount that truly reflects the cost of education, does work to improve achievement. In Maryland, for example the state reformed its school funding formula in 2002, according a weight to children living in poverty of 100% over the foundation amount for children with no special needs.

Evidence now shows that that increased funding has paid off. For every \$1000 additional spend per student, there was a corresponding increase of 4% on elementary school standardized test performance and an 8% increase at the middle school level. This additional money bought qualified teachers and other basic resources many schools were lacking.[2]

Stamford's Priority School District's Programs

Each of our Priority School District (PSD) programs is targeted to meet the goals of the PSD grants: strengthening and increasing parental involvement in our public schools, providing after school enrichment and support, and serving our at-risk children to make sure they do not drop out but rather succeed in middle school and high school. Every program funded by the PSD grant not only works, but also has become a vital component of our schools. As you will see from the descriptions below, every program is dedicated to improved academic achievement of our most vulnerable children.

Parental involvement

Recognizing that family involvement has a significant impact on student achievement, Stamford's school district has made great efforts to build cooperative relationships between families and schools.

The PSD grant funds bilingual parent facilitators at each of our 20 elementary, middle and high schools. 37% of our children come from homes where English is not the primary language. For many parents, school, and especially an American school, is a foreign and foreboding place for them. Their lack of engagement makes it difficult for teachers to communicate to parents and for there to be a continuity of effort between school and home when it comes to providing an effective education.

Our parent facilitators have had tremendous success not just bringing parents into schools, but in making them an active part of their children's education and of the school community. They organize monthly meetings in most schools, which anywhere from 20-50 fathers and mothers attend, depending on the population of each school. There, they teach parents about the American school system, how to be informed about what is going on in their school and district, how to help their kids with homework, the importance of proper nutrition, sleep and routines for schoolchildren, how to have language not be a barrier to participating in their children's education. Our facilitators will accompany parents to parent-teacher conferences and PPT meetings to translate. They translate at all pto meetings, community fora, candidates fora and other functions. They translate all notices, and even academic materials. One facilitator translates all the instructions for all first grade homework in one school. These facilitators provide parents with their home telephone numbers and are available at all hours to talk to parents and teachers. They work well beyond their hours and salary.

Moreover, our facilitators provide services that extend beyond the school walls, recognizing that much of the turbulence in our children's lives outside the school walls affects their achievement within. They collect warm clothing, food for use during school vacations, when school meals are not available. They intervene to try to find children who can't afford eyeglasses proper eyewear. If a family has a housing issue, the facilitator tries to find services for that family. Our facilitators work with our social workers, teachers, administration, ptos and every member of the school community to engage parents in their children's education, to make sure our children come to school ready to learn and leave school with tools to reinforce their learning.

After- school and extra help

The PSD grant provides salaries for reading specialists in our 12 elementary schools-positions that were cut when the state eliminated the early reading success grant. These specialists are essential to provide extra support to those students early on who, in elementary school, have difficulty reading. They work in small groups, usually of 6 children, and focus on the particular difficulty each child has. In my son's elementary school of 800 children, these teachers are constantly serving children, all day, every day. And their work brings results. To use one elementary school as an example, children in 2nd and 3rd grade on average increase their reading almost one grade level after working with these specialists. A significant amount in each grade, between 35-45%, progressed to above grade level in reading after receiving help. An overwhelming majority of the 150 or so children served by these specialists in my son's school ended up reaching goal on their DRAs. The specialists say that if they had even more staff, they would be able to

work in groups of 3, which is proving to be an optimal number to reach even better results.

Stamford's schools receive PSD money to provide after school academic support and enrichment programs that are so vital to our children's education and that many children cannot possibly afford. Children get extra help with subjects in which they need to get up to speed. The programs also make use of our community resources to enrich our children's education after school. For example, schools partner with organizations such as the Stamford Nature Center or Soundwaters, to bring hands on science experience to our children

The PSD grant provides for tutoring to our Non-Title I schools that have been identified as being "in need of improvement"- many of our non-title I schools fall just below the 40% level and have upwards of 30% children who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

Serving at-risk children to prevent dropouts and ensures success in middle and high school:

PSD funds several Stamford programs to address the needs of our at-risk middle and high school students.

After School and Saturday Tutoring--

AP course tutoring - to increase student's participation in AP courses, after school and Saturday tutoring is offered by AP teachers at Westhill High School.

Westhill Success Program – program offers tutoring and academic counseling for 9th and 10th grade students and family involvement activities.

Midterm/Final Study Group—Intensive after school study sessions for at-risk students at Westhill High School and Stamford High School prior to midterms and final exams.

ARTS program (alternative high school)- The PSD enables us to provide an after-school physical education program at our alternative high school program in which students receive high school credit.

Summer School Programming: provides materials and support for summer school program, serving Kindergarten through 12th grade.

ECMC Scholarship program—(Educational Credit Management Corporation)- The ECMC foundation provides scholarships for selected students who complete a rigorous two-year mentoring program. PSD funds mentors for these low-income, first-generation, college-bound students to further their education goals. Ten students were selected in 2010-11 and 10 additional in 2011-12. Upon successful completion in 2012, \$6,000 will

be awarded to each ECMC Scholar by the ECMC foundation to fund their post secondary plans.

Girls Circle and Boys Council Training: The purpose of Girls Circle is to encourage the development of strength, courage, confidence, honesty, and communication skills for girls so that they are able to take full advantage of their talents, academic interests, career pursuits, and potential for healthy relationships. The Boys Council is a strengths-based group approach to promote boys' and young men's safe and healthy passage through pre-teen and adolescent years. Teachers and Social Workers receive training to provide these programs after school.

These are some of the many programs made possible by the Priority School District Grant. These programs are specifically designed to improve and enrich the education of our neediest children. But for the funds provided by the state under this grant, many of our children could not be served adequately.

Stamford's Local Economic Situation

Our school budget is facing drastic cuts this year. In order to maintain the status quo of services, our budget would need to increase by 5% this year. However, our school board will request approximately a 3% increase, and may likely see no increase at all, as our Board of Finance has vowed there would be a zero percent increase in taxes. Our financial difficulties are compounded by the expiration of the ARRA grants.

It is hard to imagine the cuts not reaching the classroom and impacting all our students. Our most vulnerable students may suffer the most from increased class size and decreased services. These are the children and families who cannot fill in the gaps for themselves. These are the gaps that the Priority School District Grant allows our district to fill. With the PSD grant, we can reach out to the families most in need, provide a rich education to the children who can least afford it, and can make sure we do not lose students but rather show them how they can advance beyond high school and become responsible and productive citizens of our community and our State. We respectfully urge you not to deprive our neediest children of the chance to succeed in school and in life.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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[1] See, <http://www.schoolfunding.info/policy/CostingOut/costingout.php3>

[2] "As State Increased School Aid, Grades Went Up" <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/baltimore.md.thornton08jan08.0.6549206.story> . "State Public School System Ranked Best in U.S. by 2 Reports", <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/07/AR2009010702347.html>. For MGT report, see <http://docushare.msde.state.md.us/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-18046> .