



Written Testimony

Appropriations Committee Public Hearing

February 21, 2012

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Re: Governor's Proposed Midterm Budget Adjustments

Good Evening. My name is Michelle Ihrig, and I am a special educator at Stamford Academy, one of three charter schools operated by Domus Kids based in Stamford, CT. I am writing in favor of the additional allocations of \$2,000 per student to charter schools in Governor Malloy's Proposed Midterm Budget Adjustments.

I am in my 11th year as an educator, and my previous environments include: NYS Board of Cooperative Education Services, an inner-city residential school in upstate New York, a suburban public high school, also in upstate New York, and previous to moving to Stamford, two years in The Bahamas as an educational consultant for their Ministry of Education. This is my second year at Stamford Academy Charter High School. In each environment, the hope remains the same: successful completion of academic requirements for progression into the next academic level leading to eventual graduation from high school and acceptance into college or other postsecondary educational environment. The vast difference between each of these populations is the significant needs of the learner when they enter Domus Kids and our charter school program.

Unique Learners at a Domus Kids Charter School

In most public school locations, and in The Bahamas, students attend school based on their address; in some communities in CT, public school students are given the opportunity to attend a school of choice. At a charter school within the Domus Kids program, our students attend from a variety of communities. The students and families believe we offer the best educational program for their needs, and as a result, the students commute. For students outside of Stamford, Domus/Stamford Academy provides students with train passes and bus tokens on a daily basis; our January 2012 enrollment includes: 30 students from Bridgeport, 4 students from Norwalk, and 1 student from Stratford. The typical monthly cost for transportation for a student from Bridgeport attending Stamford Academy includes \$60 for bus tokens (\$3 a day), and \$50 for a monthly train pass for a total cost of approximately \$110 monthly, or \$1,100 yearly. Beyond unique transportation needs, here are some additional statistics regarding students attending a Domus Kids Charter School:

Middle School Academies: Trailblazers Academy and Domus Academy

- 66% of students enter three to six grade levels behind

- 90% of students are in single parent homes

- 94% of students are living in significant poverty

High School Academy: Stamford Academy

- 50% of students enter four to seven grade levels behind

- 50% of students were involved with Dpt. Children and Family due to abuse or neglect

- 65% of students have been involved with the justice system

These students require alternative methods to achieve success in addition to common educational practices such as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring.

Unique Practices at a Domus Kids Charter School

In most public schools, teachers educate a class of 25 or more students, are given 2 or more periods of prep a day, and are typically not evaluated individually for overall success at a school. Guidance counselors have a case-load of 300 or more students, meet once or twice a year with the student, and may have one or two more challenging learners; little focus is given on family need or overall social-emotional health. Schools may have metal detectors and law enforcement officers right on campus. If a student misbehaves, the district possesses a variety of opportunities to discipline including after school detention, in-school suspension, out-of school suspension, or even expulsion – which could be simply transferring the student to another program for an additional cost. (In The Bahamas it was much more cut and dry, corporal punishment, in an office or in front of peers followed by eventual suspension or expulsion.)

Students attending a Domus Kids Charter School sit in classes as few as six to as many as 16. Teachers are provided one prep period, though may sacrifice it if a colleague is out sick because we typically do not bring substitute teachers into our programs. A significant difference to our program is our Family Advocacy model in which students are assigned to an adult with a caseload of around 30 who helps to ensure all barriers to academic success are

addressed. This may include connecting the family to outside resources, offering counseling services, or arranging for the family to be an angel tree family. During Christmas 2011, staff at Stamford Academy sponsored a student and her family who had 8 children in the house and 1 parent. On our own time and with our own resources, we purchased coats, gifts, and food for each family member; it truly was a Christmas the family had never had before.

At Stamford Academy, we do have students stay for detentions of as little as 10 minutes, and on the rare instance, we may suspend a student. The philosophy of Domus Kids is Love Lives Here. If a child is not successful in our programs, we adapt curriculum, refer for possible special education services, connect with other school programs to see if one is more appropriate, and if necessary, even create our own new program, just for the learner.

Our Success

As a charter school, we have the unique ability to adapt immediately to the needs of our schools and our learners, and our success is in our numbers:

91% of graduating seniors in the 2010-2011 school year had acceptance letters to postsecondary education when they walked across stage

Domus Academy students grew 1.7 grade levels in reading in just 9 months

Trailblazers Academy students enter school farther behind than any other peer group but make gains which meet or exceed their peers

Their Future

We recognize for many of our students, specifically those at Stamford Academy, we are the last stop for their futures. It is our mission and our call to never give up on our students. We believe in them, despite who they are when they come to us, the struggles they face when they are not with us, and even their actions when they are with us... we believe in them.

Additional allocations to support our efforts will allow for enhanced instruction including more technology in the classroom, field trips, after-school programs, credit recovery opportunities, additional staff, and training for students, parents, and staff.

By voting in favor of additional allocations to charter schools, you are speaking for an often-forgotten population in Connecticut, our youth, who dream big dreams, despite the circumstances they are faced with.