

Good evening. My name is Pamela Zmek. I represent the Town of Bethlehem on the Region 14 Board of Education. In my day job, I'm a learning specialist in Fairfield County and collaborate with administrators and teachers regarding the learning needs of students in my district.

In July 2011 when the General Assembly passed Pub. Act 11-135, requiring, among other things, that each Board of Education implement Student Success Plans, I got very excited. Schools would now be required to create plans to help students stay connected to school and plan for postsecondary educational and career goals. I thought, "Region 14 has that! It sounds just like our Ag program!" We have academic rigor. We have mentorship. We have students committed to hundreds of hours of community service before they graduate. Our program creates close emotional bonds between students. It increases connectedness to school. It fosters self-esteem and enhances social development, just as Student Success Plans are supposed to. It is truly education with a purpose, it's differentiated instruction at its best. All the perfect ingredients for student success. It's no wonder that each year Region 14 turns away hundreds of students hoping to join our program.

We see kids clamoring for rigor, setting goals, and finding meaning in what they do. Unfortunately, the only barriers they encounter are the limits placed before them by the adults in their world. That is: the programs we can't enhance, the students we must turn away and the teachers we are unable to hire. Right now, these young men and women are waiting upon us to decide their future.

I recently spoke to a young man in 8th grade attending a private school in Fairfield County. His greatest wish is to become a veterinarian. When he was in 7th grade, a friend told him about Nonnewaug's AgScience program, so on weekends he began community service at a rescue shelter to gain experience working with animals. As he told me this, my heart broke, as I knew that despite his passion, hard work and excellent grades, this young man still had only a 50/50 chance of being accepted. And unfortunately, there are many, many other students just like him.

Conventional wisdom tells us we need to do a lot more in education, but really, I think all we have to do is a lot more of what works in education.

Please adopt the ECS Task Force School Choice Funding recommendation into the Governor's proposed Budget.

Thank you.