

TESTIMONY OF JOHN DESTEFANO, JR.

Re: SB398

February 26, 2015

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Willis, and members of the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement,

I deeply regret I cannot join you today to offer my remarks in person. Instead I am submitting written testimony on behalf of SB398, an initiative that will provide the same access to financial aid for all of our State's high school graduates regardless of immigration status. I am urging your favorable consideration of SB398 as it will:

- Increase jobs and tax revenue in the State of Connecticut;
- Retain additional talent that will promote the economic development of our State and its cities and towns; and,
- Strengthen initiative already undertaken by the State in school reform, economic development and resident equity.

As you might recall, I was Mayor of New Haven from 1994 through 2013. As you will also recall I was both a member of the City's school Board and appointed all the other members of the school board. During that period the City initiated several collaborative strategies to grow wealth and enable the social and economic mobility of our City residents. Key aspects of those initiatives were:

- A collaborative school reform initiative undertaken in partnership with parents, community leaders and the New Haven School Administrators Association and the New Haven Federation of Teachers. That initiative is well known to your Honorable Committee and has resulted in meaningful reductions in the high school drop-out rate and college-going in New Haven;
- Building on that initiative, four years ago the City established New Haven Promise to offer New Haven students full tuition to Connecticut State colleges and universities. This is an earned benefit (i.e. 3.0 GPA and 90% attendance) but does not distinguish upon immigration status. It is a benefit for all City resident students who do the work; and,
- A series of immigration initiatives that has resulted, in part, in the largest population gains, job growth and high commercial and residential real estate occupancy rates in New England – across the board. I would refer you to a report from January 2015 prepared by DataHaven and sponsored by the Community Foundation of Greater New Haven¹ that documents the growth that has resulted in New Haven from its support of robust immigration strategies.

For all that, much work remains to be done. While New Haven Promise provides substantial benefits for all students attending State universities and colleges and a stipend for those attending private institutions – gaps in meeting the cost of their education remain. SB398 will remedy those gaps.

¹ <http://www.cfgnh.org/About/NewsEvents/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleID/224/Default.aspx>

Let me explain. While Mayor of New Haven, over 15,000 students graduated high school. Many of these students were children of undocumented immigrants, and many of these students had no formal legal status. I have written elsewhere² about how students like these are often indistinguishable from their peers in terms of academic achievement, speech, dress, and in the kinds of struggles youth engage in as they grow up.

The difference of course is that until now, while their peers went on to attend a Connecticut college or university enjoying full access to financial aid, many of these undocumented students found they had to work full time while taking one or two classes, working slowly towards completing their degrees. Without access to financial aid these students, many of whom may not have even known they were undocumented until they applied to college, simply cannot follow the same path as their peers.

By allowing all students access to financial aid, regardless of immigration status, SB398 will provide equality in education, which these students so deserve. Even more it will reward the values of hard work, persistence and ambition – character factors that are essential to a competitive and growing work force. The goal here is to support all our young people as they become community members who work, pay taxes, join their places of worship and accept the responsibility of citizenship – of giving back.

The opportunity for the Legislature is to support all of Connecticut's students in developing their talents and contributing all they can to the State's economy. This is an investment not only in these young people, but in Connecticut's economy and in keeping faith with traditional values that have served our State so well when we have been faithful to them. This is about thinking big and about thinking smart.

Thank you for your consideration of my remarks. My best wishes for you in your important work; and, my gratitude for your commitment of time and thought to our State.

Very truly yours,

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² <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/opinion/nyregionopinions/19destefano.html?ref=topics>