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John DeStefano, Jr.

Mayor, City of New Haven, 1994 to 2013

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

Connecticut General Assembly

Re: Senate Bill 147

Sen. Bartolomeo, Rep. Willis, members of the committee, I am proud to submit this testimony. As you know, during my tenure as Mayor of New Haven, the City saw the immigration of new populations as an asset, embraced these populations, and has experienced robust growth even in these most difficult financial times. It is my conviction that S.B. 147 offers a similar opportunity for economic growth and competitiveness for the entire State of Connecticut.

Many of the students who will speak before you today will demonstrate the potential of this bill to improve the lives of so many Connecticut residents. I submit testimony to answer a different question: Why now? How, in a year of budget cuts across the board, can we afford this bill?

I would start by noting that S.B. 147 does not include any cost to the taxpayer. That is because institutional aid comes from tuition dollars, not tax dollars. Undocumented students have been paying into the institutional aid pool for years. All this bill does is enable them to start accessing some of the money they have already been putting in.

More than that, I believe that this year is absolutely the right time to pass this bill. When I was Mayor of New Haven and our city faced budget cuts, my starting point was this: Budget cuts do not mean we should cut back on our vision for the future. Rather, a year of budget cuts is precisely the time to invest in the next generation.

S.B. 147 is exactly the type of smart investment that we should be making in order to grow our economy and our tax base so that we can avoid budget cuts in the years ahead.

This bill will help some of Connecticut's best and brightest minds. It assists undocumented students who have done the hard work in high school and earned the grades to be admitted to college. Many have already overcome tremendous odds. Like many other young people in Connecticut, their families are not wealthy enough to pay full tuition at a state college. Yet, unlike other young people, they cannot receive institutional aid because of their immigration status.

If this bill fails, many of these young people will not be able to afford to go to college. Indeed, that is why some people are hoping this bill will fail. The opponents of this bill believe that if they deny undocumented students a chance at a better future, these students will simply "go home." But most of the young people that this bill would help came to America when they were very young – too young to remember any other place. They do not have another home. Connecticut is their home.

Denying these young people a chance at a higher education hurts everyone. Undocumented students will be forced to enter low-wage jobs and perform menial labor. This means fewer tax dollars and fewer job creators. This would be a waste of tremendous talent that could help our state.

Passing this bill, however, will give these young people a chance to build a better future for themselves and the state. Many of them will enter college and go on to become entrepreneurs, accountants, engineers and scientists that help to grow our economy. They will have a better chance of getting – and creating – high-wage jobs that contribute to Connecticut’s tax base.

With regards to financial gains, the RAND Corporation estimates that doubling the number of Hispanics nationwide with bachelor’s degrees “would result in a \$7.6 billion increase in tax contributions [and] a \$5.4 billion decrease in public spending for social welfare, health, and law enforcement programs.”¹ Not all undocumented students are Hispanic and not all Hispanics are undocumented. However, this figure gives an indication of the powerful economic and fiscal benefits of this bill.

This is why many other state legislatures – from Texas to California to Minnesota to Washington – have opened state or institutional financial aid to undocumented students. Connecticut now has a chance to join these states in passing similar common-sense legislation.

In a year of budget cuts, our task of identifying smart investments that will grow the economy is all the more urgent. S.B. 147 is the type of high-reward investment that we must make today so that our state will be stronger tomorrow. I urge the Committee to unanimously pass this bill and send it to the Senate for immediate consideration. It is an investment in a better, more economically powerful future for all of us.

Thank you for allowing me to speak on this critical issue.

¹ George Vernez & Lee Mizell, *Goal: To Double the Rate of Hispanics Earning a Bachelor’s Degree* (2001) at ix. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/documented_briefings/2005/DB350.pdf