

Fish Stark, City of New Haven Peace Commissioner

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Education

In Support of SB 379

AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MINORITY TEACHER
RECRUITMENT TASK FORCE

March 7, 2016

Good Evening Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann and distinguished members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening with regards to education in our state. I also would like to take a moment and thank you for your hard work and dedication towards the educational opportunity of all Connecticut's children.

My name is Fish Stark, and I'm a student, youth organizer, and educator in New Haven. In addition to studying at Yale University, I've worked as a teaching fellow at Squash Haven, a tuition-free program that combines athletics, academics, and college placement for students from New Haven Public Schools, and the Calvin Hill Day Care Center, a preschool in New Haven that serves a diverse range of families on a sliding income scale. In addition, I am the Executive Director of the Teaching Peace Initiative, a nonprofit that trains high school students to teach conflict resolution and anti-bullying curricula in their schools, and is active in many states, including Connecticut.

In my time working with youth in Connecticut--as an educator and a political organizer--the educational opportunity and equity gaps in schools and districts across Connecticut have become painstakingly clear to me. The quality of a child's education varies wildly based on their race, their parents' income, and the neighborhood they live in. The widening achievement gap in this state is decimating any hope low-income children may have of social mobility, and in my mind constitutes a crisis.

I firmly believe, and research also shows, that the best means of enhancing educational outcomes for our children is ensuring each and every child has an effective teacher leading their classroom. So today, I urge you to support SB 379, because this bill goes a long way towards ensuring every child, in every school, in every city, can get a great teacher that can educate them, uplift them, and inspire them to new heights. The fact that 92% of teachers in Connecticut schools are white is alarming, and must change quickly--and the continuation of the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force is essential for change on this front. As a white educator who has taught students of color, I do not mean to suggest that children must always be educated by teachers of their same race. But having a representative school staff and administration matters in the critical years when students are developing their sense of self. As the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Teaching Tolerance* magazine [notes](#), it can be harmful for students of color to attend schools where the teaching staff is all-white or nearly all-white: all students benefit from schools where they can identify with their role models and authority figures. With changing demographics in our state and a noticeable expansion

of poverty, we need to make certain our educators are prepared to teach and drive student achievement in any and all communities.

Additionally, as the task force has indicated, our state's current bureaucratic means of establishing licensure reciprocity is a hindrance to bringing in effective educators into our classrooms, particularly our candidates of color. With more than 40% of our students being students of color and less than 1-in-10 being minority educators, it is clear we must do more. And when we say to do more, it's critical to understand why, and focus on the benefits of increasing diversity in the classroom.

- Students of color, taught by educators of color, perform better on a number of academic and non-academic indicators; including student performance, suspension rates, expulsion rates, school discipline and attendance.
- But the positives of diversity in our teaching workforce are not limited to our students of color. Bringing diversity into the classroom creates a wider sense of community for our students, while at the same time bringing a healthy melting pot of experiences, cultural norms and perspectives into the classroom.
- Educators of color are also more likely to work in, and stay working in, our most vulnerable communities. By increasing the amount of educators of color in the State of Connecticut, we can, in turn, cultivate a pipeline of teachers ready to improve student achievement and effectively educate students in cities like Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven.

With that, I testify today in strong support of SB 379. The power of a great educator can not be understated, and the positive impact of improving licensure reciprocity and increasing diversity of our teacher workforce is clear. I ask that you support this bill and make certain the State of Connecticut is continuously working to fill our classrooms with educators that can make all the difference in the lives of children.

Thank you.