February 21, 2017

Re: HB-07027 CSDE - ECS - Equitable funding in education.

Dear Chairwoman Walker, Chairwoman Osten, Chairman Formica, Ranking Member Ziobron and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

At the school where I teach in Bridgeport, many employees perform the jobs of three (or more) people. Students who live a mile and a half from school do not get a school bus or a bus pass. After-school activities are regularly canceled because the school cannot afford to pay security. Teachers make copies of novels for their 90 students because the district cannot buy books.

The inequity of the school finance system in Connecticut affects my life every single day, but I am lucky; I have already graduated from college and have a stable job. I have achieved many of my goals. My students, on the other hand, are put at risk each day as they enter a school that does not have the financial ability to adequately prepare them for their future. It affects them day-to-day as they move through their classes, where teachers are stretched thin by the financial and intellectual demands of teaching in an underfunded school. More concerning, however, is the effect it will have on their ambitions and future careers; because of the viscous inequity in our state, they may likely enter higher education or the workforce severely underprepared for the challenges of life after high school.

Fixing the disparity in funding between urban and suburban schools would have innumerable benefits at Bassick High School. We could hire climate specialists who are charged with helping our students, who often live lives ripe with inconsistency, to regulate their emotions and focus on their school work. We could hire more administrators so that one person is not in charge of the overseeing more than 500 students. We could hire more guidance counselors; we could have field trips; we could buy paper - all seemingly common items that for some reason, in Connecticut, separate the haves from the have-nots.

The materials and personnel we could afford would certainly boost learning, but an increase in money would do more than just provide supplies. My students are observant and intelligent - they know that the districts that surround Bridgeport have more money, and they astutely infer that if more money is being spent on wealthier, often white students, than those students must be more valuable than they are. Additional funding for our school would prove to my students that this country cares about them, in a time when national politics makes that so hard for them to believe that. This needed boost in confidence has everything to do with their ability to learn, as when they see others believe in them, they start to believe in themselves.

School finance is a big, complicated issue and I do not have all of the answers. But I do know that my students cannot continue attending a school that is unable to support their eager, brilliant young minds especially if it does not have the funds to do so. The current state of school finance in Connecticut is a disgrace to my 74 9th and 10th graders and to all of the students in the state, and the legislature should look to the needs and suggestions of educators in order to correct it.

Sincerely,

Jillian Harkins
9th and 10th grade English Teacher
Bassick High School