

Debra Wilson
117 Vine Road
Stamford, CT 06905

February 24, 2018

Re: Senate Bill 183 – An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Department of Education (Section 9 regarding the Teacher Education and Mentoring Program or TEAM)

Dear Legislators:

It has come to my attention that the funding for TEAM has been cut from the budget, and that the program is practically eliminated in Senate Bill 183 (Section 9). I'm writing to urge you to reinstate this valuable funding and protect this successful program. The restoration of TEAM funding will not only make a real difference for new teachers and their students, but also for mentors and their students as well.

Under the guidance of my first mentor, I chose early on to become involved in after school clubs. I've served as an Odyssey of the Mind coach to several teams over the years; I was the advisor for the school yearbook for many years before passing that baton to a colleague who was excited to accept the challenge; I am AVID trained and use those strategies in my classroom year after year; I am a member of the curriculum committee for language arts; I recently took a position as co-program director for our After School Titan program; I am also incredibly fortunate to be part of Connecticut's TEAM program, which means I've had the honor and pleasure of working with student teachers and mentees over the years. In October of 2017, I was trained by Claudine Pomrack of CSDE to be a Chief Regional Reviewer and am currently acting in that capacity. Of all the additional experiences I've had over my almost-25 years of teaching, I count the collaboration with new teachers to be among the most beneficial—for me, for them, and for our students.

As an educator, I find that I am also constantly learning. In a recent professional development activity, the group I was with got into a heated discussion regarding children and the responsibilities of the family in educating our youth. Our facilitator could have allowed us to continue with a familiar debate, during which some of us would have regaled about how families need to do their part so that we, as educators, can do our part. Instead, she left us with a bit of wisdom. She said, "Your classroom is your circle of influence. Take that time and strive to make the changes and model the behaviors that you want to see in your students." Those simple words carry a very powerful message, a message that promises hope and opportunity. I may be saddened by the reality of the lives of some of my students, but that doesn't mean that I have lost the opportunity to have a positive impact on their experience in my classroom. I cannot control what happens when they walk out of my room, but while they are in my room, under my care, I can offer them academic opportunities to fit their individual needs. It is this very wisdom I seek to arm new teachers with.

Being a new teacher is difficult in and of itself. TEAM allows for mentorship for our new teachers to help them navigate the professional responsibilities that accompany this demanding,

and often exhausting, job. Through the TEAM process, I have had the unique opportunity to be able to influence new teachers while reflecting on my own professional practice. I want to share a portion of a thank you letter I recently received from Kristy Restivo, now a colleague, who, many years ago, completed her student teaching under my guidance. Kristy wrote, "Words cannot express the positive influence you have had on me as a new teacher. You taught me the importance of building rapport with students as soon as they enter the classroom. You have an amazing ability to connect with even the most challenging students. Your students know that you care about them as individuals; therefore, they put forth greater effort when working to complete assignments. Your compassion and optimism for your students is what make you an extraordinary cooperative teacher. The lesson you taught me about working with challenging kids is one that I will take with me forever. You said, "You cannot give up on any child." Those words echo in my head during the moments I think about leaving this profession. You were extremely supportive and understanding during my student teaching experience and later as my mentor in TEAM. You taught me useful strategies and techniques to help me thrive as a student teacher; as my mentor, you motivated me to be independent and gave me the confidence to try anything I wanted to in the classroom. As a colleague, I still rely on your thoughtful feedback when I've had a bad day—or, even, a good one☺ There were moments when I felt completely defeated after teaching a lesson for the first time or disciplining a student. You were always there to listen to my concerns and provide positive feedback. You taught me to always reflect on my instruction. You helped me to find and celebrate my strengths and to recognize my weaknesses in order to grow as an educator. I take those lessons I learned with me every time I enter a classroom." What Kristy doesn't realize is that she inspires me as much, if not more, than I inspire her. I have found the current professional learning process that is embedded in the TEAM modules and the reflection paper process to be invaluable as both a mentor and as an educator.

We are not firemen. We are not policemen. We are certainly not animated super heroes. But, as teachers, we can be heroes in our own right. As teachers, we have the ability to offer compassion. As teachers, we have the ability to offer safety. As teachers, we have the ability to offer hope. I firmly believe, as a teacher—and as a mentor to new teachers—that I have the power to make a difference. I am gravely concerned about the cuts to TEAM and the support it provides to all educators and the children in their classes. The message you are sending to educators by cutting this funding is that education doesn't matter. I urge you to restore TEAM funding! An investment in TEAM is an investment in our teachers. An investment in our teachers is an investment in our students. An investment in our students is an investment in our future!

Sincerely,

Debra Wilson
Current TEAM mentor
Current TEAM reviewer
Current TEAM Regional Reviewer
Current TEAM Committee Member
Stamford Public Schools