March 5, 2018

Testimony of Sherry Lee
Member, Yale Asian American Studies Task Force

In opposition: R.S.B. 359
An Act Prohibiting the Disaggregation of Student Data by Ethnic Subgroups in the Public School Information System.

My name is Sherry Lee. I am from Fairfax, VA and currently reside in New Haven, CT. I am a Taiwanese immigrant and American citizen, currently studying at Yale University and am affiliated with Yale’s Asian American Studies Task Force. I stand in opposition to RBS 359.

As a member of the Taiwanese- and Chinese-American immigrant community, I have grown up around families who have striven to give their children a better chance at academic and professional success, so I fully understand the motivations of Chinese Americans who oppose student data disaggregation and have organized behind this bill. Many of these parents and students are concerned that this bill will damage their chances at admission to elite institutions of higher education, and are suspicious of data collection that targets Asian Americans above other groups in an affirmative action-based admissions system that limits the admission of Asian Americans.

However, we—as Asian-Americans—do not exist in a monolith. The obvious divisions are regional and national; South Asians must not be elided with East Asians, immigrants must not be elided with American-born Asians. More pressingly, class distinctions among Asian Americans deserve greater clarity. The ‘model minority’ myth has been permitted perpetuation because the most visible stories of the lives of Asians who live in the United States are those of success. We forget that many Asian immigrants gained entry into the United States on the basis of their projected profit and capital, and we forget that even with these restrictions many of them do not rise to the upper-middle-class. The ability to collect data on country of origin within racial and ethnic categories, grade level, and socioeconomic status in schools can only help not just in ascertaining the diversity of our academic populations, but also in applying more specific and effective methods in helping diverse student bodies achieve academically.

My background could not have made it clearer to me the important differences within the “Asian American” community—a label that I at times find a misleading catch-all, loaded with expectations of success and cultural aggression—that desperately require greater recognition. Unlike everyone else in my community while I was growing up, neither of my parents had completed a degree in the United States; they had immigrated only after their education for work.
I was not born in the United States, but had the fortune to develop an interest in languages that allowed me to pass an exam that exempted me from ESOL courses (English for Speakers of Other Languages) when I first began kindergarten. I grew up less affluent than other families, and only much later in my life did my family enter into the middle to upper-middle class echelon. Because Fairfax is a county particularly saturated with Asian immigrants, I grew up around Vietnamese, Indian, and Korean Americans who were poorer, whose parents struggled with English and could not afford many of the opportunities that more affluent Asian American families could. These students, like myself, relied solely on themselves, but many of them struggle. More specific information about such students might have resulted in interventions during their education to help their academic achievement. Particularly in a competitive context like school admissions or school resources (fellowships, financial aid, etc.), it would be extremely dangerous and damaging to these ‘less visible’ members of the Asian American community to assume that they are a part of the East Asian, upper-middle class community.

Asian Americans are an extremely diverse—more diverse than we often assume—and fast-growing population that include East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander ethnic groups among over 18 million individuals. The image we typically associate with “Asian American”—that of Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, and Filipino Americans—is actually representative of less than one-quarter of the total Asian American population. Truly, we are not getting the full picture here. This bill would, instead of helping Asian Americans, do greater damage to the majority of its members. If we are truly seeking to make Connecticut schools more responsive to ethnic diversity and class differences, this bill would only hurt our students and our resident Asian Americans.

Thank you,

Sherry Lee