Dear Appropriations Committee,

I am a resident of North Haven and the parent of two children attending the New Haven Public Schools through the interdistrict magnet program. I am writing to testify about H.B. No. 7148 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET, specifically its lack of a funding increase for public education in our urban school districts.

For the 2018-19 school year, NHPS faced a deficit of nearly $9 million. Prior efforts had reduced that deficit from a projection of $20 million, but despite heroic efforts, including the closure of a magnet high school and two alternative education programs, $9 million has persisted. For the coming school year, the new deficit is projected to be $30 million.

In September, our new superintendent, Dr. Birks, made drastic cuts to guidance and library staff. Most schools in the district, if they have libraries at all, have them only staffed part-time. There are no longer guidance counsellors in the elementary schools. In the high schools, the student-to-guidance counselor ratio has been increased, and at least one high school with a substantial English-learner population lost its bilingual counsellor. In planning for next year’s budget, Dr. Birks has already announced her plan to “right-size” the teaching staff by filling classrooms to the maximum allowed under the teachers’ contract (27). This will limit offerings in high schools, since many AP and elective classes are smaller than this. It will also deprive younger students of their teachers’ focus and attention. Small class sizes have proven to be one of the best educational approaches for students growing up in poverty.

Despite this pressing need, and despite an increase in student enrollment, Governor Lamont’s budget actually slightly decreases the amount for New Haven’s ECS (education cost sharing). New Haven’s Alliance grant is to be increased somewhat, but limitations on what the Alliance grant can pay for (non-supplantation) make it a poor substitute for truly adequate funding. New Haven’s Mayor Toni Harp has budgeted less than one million dollars increase for the schools from city funds. New Haven taxpayers struggle with low incomes, a high mill rate, and the loss of a large fraction of the city’s most valuable property, removed from the tax rolls by Yale University and Hospital.

While our schools have been flat-funded for years and as our children lose school staff and services, Connecticut in 2018 surrendered $202,111,124 to corporate tax abatements and another $5,133,481 to business grants and loans, according to www.goodjobsfirst.org/subsidy-tracker. The state also appears ready to sacrifice $230 million from estate tax revenues. The focus has been on businesses and the wealthy, rather than on children and families, and that unfortunate priority has deepened the inequality in the state.

I ask the Appropriations Committee to change Connecticut’s priorities to put the care and education of its children first. Please appropriate significant funding increases, on the order of $10 million per urban district, for public education in our cities.

Thank you for your attention,

Jill Kelly
New Haven Public School Advocates