Testimony of Bridget Walker, Paraeducator, CREC Montessori Magnet School

Dear Senator Abrams, Representative Rosario, Senator McCarty, Representative Somers, and members of the Appropriations Subcommittee,

My name is Bridget Walker. I have lived in Hartford most of my life. I consider myself fortunate to be part of the Magnet school system not only as a parent but also as an employee. As a child, I attended school here in Hartford at Noah Webster Elementary, Quirk Middle School, and Hartford Public High School. I have raised my 4 children here in Hartford. Three of my children attended Hartford public schools while one son attended a magnet high school in Manchester (CREC Great Pathway Academy.) All of my children graduated high school and my son who attended CREC Great Pathway Academy graduated from UCONN. I am familiar with the status of Hartford Public schools before Sheff vs O'Neill through my own school experience. I have also experienced the progress that has been made in many schools since Sheff vs O’Neil through my children’s experience as well as through my employment in a Magnet school. My son who attended college was the only one who had an opportunity to attend a magnet school through the school choice program. I am writing and speaking here today to ask that you provide the needed additional funding to magnet schools in the budget.

As an employee, I am currently a Para Educator at CREC Montessori Magnet School located at the Learning Corridor on Broad Street since 2000. This school serves students in grades pre-K3 through grade 6. In my position, I support teachers in the classroom providing support in the Montessori curriculum as well as providing assistance for struggling students.

Montessori Magnet school qualifies as a bilingual school and has a high minority population. The school provides schooling to students from 39 surrounding towns with 50% of the students residing in Hartford. 100% of our students receive free breakfast and lunch. We have a very diverse student body and an equally diverse and dedicated staff. Every year Montessori Magnet School has seen students make commendable gains and outperform many districts with smaller minority populations in State-wide Assessments.

At CREC Montessori Magnet School, we give the children the opportunity to learn at their own pace and find their own talents which we help them nurture. Not only do teachers and staff work tirelessly to ensure students success, but students help their fellow students. We maintain a caring, close community that really is like an extended family, so much so that even years after students move on to higher levels, they return to visit as successful high school and college students. They return because it’s the place where they first learned how to BE successful, in a secure, safe and supported environment. It’s where they could risk trying something difficult, something new, making errors without fear of failure and dream their own dreams that they could make come true.

When our students leave their upper elementary classrooms and move on to secondary and higher education, they have a solid foundation for success. As students go through the complete CREC school
experience, they truly see the power of having received a magnet school education. They learn to be comfortable in a diverse environment with staff and fellow students from all walks of life.

My passion has been to help students be effective citizens and give them the tools and opportunities to experience learning in the real world. As a parent first and then as staff member, I can tell you first hand that Connecticut magnet schools are teaching children to be global citizens, able to solve everyday problems and work creatively and cooperatively with others, those both similar to and very different from themselves.

The opportunity to work in a CREC school that brings inner city and suburban students together has been a dream opportunity for me. Every day, I watch as students are encouraged and motivated to work to their true potential in a diverse setting. Many parents choose our school for its uniqueness in providing for the whole child and for its diversity both ethnically and economically. All students can be successful and the achievement gap can be closed given the environment that magnet schools provide.

Please help make certain we have the necessary resources so we can continue to provide this excellent education all students deserve. Funding needs to increase in order to grow and continue this important work we do that is so vital for the growth of our students. It is through proper funding that magnet schools are able to provide the students with the resources that they need to be have a successful future and keep the Sheff vs O’Neil vision alive. Please vote to appropriate the justified increase in funding for our magnet schools so we can give ALL students the learning environment they deserve and help provide needed resources to all of our students.

Unfortunately, all of our students do NOT come to us from equally advantaged home environments, with the same types of support, exposure and developed abilities when they first walk through our doors, HOWEVER the funding decisions you make may allow ALL of them to leave our school with sufficient confidence, a wide range of well-developed talents and a maximized potential that will make them AND you proud.

As the saying goes . . . "Do the right thing!"

Thank you,

Bridget Walker

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