

February 21, 2019

Dear Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Delores S. Williams and I am from New Haven, Connecticut. I have two children attending a magnet school in New Haven called Davis Academy for Arts & Design Innovation. I am submitting testimony to ask you to support HB-7109: An Act Concerning Interdistrict Magnet School Program Funding.

I chose Davis Academy for Arts & Design Innovation school because it is similar to the school I attended as a youth within the city of New Haven, for its commitment to inclusion through a focus on performing arts. My children thrive here. This diverse and engaging learning environment builds core academic knowledge alongside specialized art programming. Additionally, I know that my children learn better and are more prepared for the real world as a result of working alongside other students from different backgrounds and with different needs.

My nine-year-old daughter and eldest child, was diagnosed on the spectrum at two years old and needed an intense regimen of early intervention support. At twenty-two months she was functioning cognitively at the level of a ten-month-old baby. You might imagine that my family has been faced with many choices and challenges since then. There were days when I did not know if she would ever call me "Mommy". I want it to be noted, as a result of her hard work and my network of support in advocating for her education, she has blossomed immensely. She became student of the month and has achieved high honors on the honor roll for two consecutive marking periods this year in her school. The support of teachers, administrators, therapists, social workers, and an arts program where she plays violin, learns piano, and participates in the gardening program, have all contributed in propelling her forward. District funding is an essential element in her continuing journey of success. The lack thereof, as you know, often puts families in direct conflict with the dreams and goals they hold for their children.

I recently attended a two-day teacher training offered by our district on Restorative Practices. I wanted to be amongst teachers to learn from them about the challenges they face within the context of the classroom and the school day. I listened to their stories and their dreams for their students. I shared my own with them. I urge you to be in the spaces where teachers are once in a while. Be open minded. Learn from them. Hear from them. I connected with some really fantastic educators some newcomers and some seasoned in their careers. All very thoughtful people. Our Teachers need more support not less. This is essential to the vitality of our classrooms. Strong classrooms need funding to build sturdy kids. Sturdy kids build stable thriving communities.

Many of our students are coming to school having been exposed to multiple traumas which greatly affect their confidence, socialization skills, and behaviors. This is especially a challenge

for students in lower elementary grades who don't know how to express themselves well. Right now, many schools have part-time counselors who only service students in grades five and above. This puts our most vulnerable students at a severe disadvantage. As a district we are still struggling to close the achievement gap and our test scores demonstrate a need for additional support during the day. Our schools need full time tutors who are able to focus on one full-time job where they can be fully present rather than juggling two to three jobs to make ends meet. They need and deserve benefits. We really need to preserve the bodies in the buildings that we have. The threat to additional staff cuts poses a significant threat to the wellbeing of our students.

In these tight budget times, our magnet schools are at risk. Without sustainable funding, my child's magnet school may be forced to cut essential programming.

I am asking the legislature to follow through on its promise to invest in the future of *all* students. Magnet schools have a successful track record of closing the achievement gap and providing all students a chance not only to succeed but to thrive. Refocused efforts are needed to sustain and accelerate Connecticut's progress and to ensure the constitutional rights of all students. Magnet schools must be funded at a level that will enable them to continue offering innovative, high-quality educational environments that meet the needs of all learners.

Thank you for listening to my concerns. I hope we can count on your support.

Sincerely,

Delores S. Williams