

To: CT State ECS Task Force

From: James Martinez, Norwalk, CT - Principal Fox Run Elementary

Date: July 12, 2012

Subject: Fair funding for Norwalk

Good evening members of the ECS Task Force:

My name is James Martinez. I live at 237 Guinea Rd in Monroe and I am also the Principal of one of twelve elementary schools in Norwalk - Fox Run Elementary.

I genuinely want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

This is my 24th year in education. The past 9 years I've been in Norwalk. Originally from New York City, I was always drawn to urban settings and diverse communities. Frankly, this desire to serve children in an urban setting is what drew me to the Norwalk. It wasn't until working in Norwalk over a period of time and experiencing challenging and grueling budget reconciliations that just get tougher each year, that I came to the realization how inequitable and truly unfair the ECS formula is and has been to the children of the Norwalk Public Schools.

I honestly don't understand how property values – or the grand list has remained a major factor in determining town wealth when it comes to Norwalk. I understand because of the weighting of this grand list factor, the ECS formula makes Norwalk appear to have a greater ability to pay for education than it actually has. I am here this evening, like many of us to share how perception is NOT reality in our case.

I shared coming to Norwalk, the draw was thinking of it as an urban school district and in many respects it indeed is. For example, up until three years ago, my school qualified for a Title I grant as we know to be based on our population of students who receive free and reduced lunch – or as we now politically correctly call them – the economically disadvantaged. My school no longer qualifies, as the districts enrollment of students eligible for free and reduced lunch has increased dramatically. Some of our schools percentages are as high as almost 70% economically disadvantaged. My school remains consistently at about 33% with a population size of approximately 440 students. That's a 1/3 of my student population!

We also have a staggering number of English Language Learners (ELL) coming into the district with no prior formal education and living in Norwalk's low income housing.

Our busiest staff members is probably our school nurse and school social worker who tirelessly seek clothing donations for our students who come to school wearing summer wear in the dead of winter of single digit temperatures. We have a waiting list of children in the CT food bank backpack program, when we already have 30 families receiving food every Friday to take home for the weekend when obviously not in school to eat.

Fortunately, there have been organizations like the *United Way of Fairfield Coastal County* that have stepped in and offered to support a limited number of families (in this case just 4) during the holidays. Unfortunately, this support is not quite enough. This past year 4 families benefited from this kindness and received in addition to some conventional Christmas presents, actual beds, sheets, clothes, such as coats, boots, hats, and gloves - - lots of research out there on poverty and its impact on achievement. I hated having to choose just 4 families of so many in need, but felt so grateful to be able to contact those families that were in most need.

One of those families was a young single dad of two children in the autistic spectrum - one severely low-functioning and a 2nd grader in our extended resource classroom. Dad is single, because his young 30 year old wife died that year of cancer leaving him to care for his two special needs children. They live in even deeper poverty because in order for him to be the father he needs to be and wants to be, he settled for a part-time job so he can be present for his children.

In Norwalk, we couldn't ask for a more supportive mayor, Board of Education, and city governing bodies, and many other elected officials that go well beyond the call of duty in their commitment to our children especially when it comes to seeking more funding for our school system. However, even with all of their efforts, they can only do so much with what we have.

So to that end, PLEASE take what we are all sharing this evening with you into very careful consideration when reviewing the CT's ECS formula - that it be as fair as it can possibly be and not based on a perception of what is merely in writing as much as based on the number of children and families we have that truly struggle and fight to be afforded the same educational support that of our wealthier towns.