

My name is Lynn Sadlon and I have lived in Norwalk for 23 years. I am a lifelong Connecticut resident, spending the first half of my life in its “quiet corner.”

Prior to moving to Norwalk, I lived in Darien for nine years and I am going to tell you, even though we share a border and a waterfront – Norwalk is no Darien. Darien does not, for the most part, educate the children of its gardeners, maids, restaurant workers, nannies and day laborers. That job falls to cities such as Stamford and Norwalk.

In 1989, I moved to a waterfront community in Norwalk. Now you might have a visual image of waterfront “mcmansions,” but the reality is that the community where I live in is made up of mixed housing. There are some new homes, some 1950 ranch homes, but primarily there are homes built in the late 1800’s that now serve as multi-family housing – much like the housing you see in Waterbury, Meriden, Danbury, Norwich and other cities in Connecticut. As a matter of fact, that is one way young people can afford to buy a home in Fairfield County, they live in one apartment and rent out the others to pay the mortgage. I would guess my neighborhood along the Norwalk River is made up of 60 percent homeowners and 40 percent renters.

About a half mile away, there is Water Street. Water Street is named because it runs along the water – in this case the Norwalk River – although residents will tell you they think it is Water Street because the street often floods when the tides are high.

One side of Water Street is zoned for commercial business. On the other side of Water Street is a public housing community for low-income residents, one of nine such public housing projects in Norwalk.

I was talking recently with an educator from the Friends of the Norwalk Islands, a non-profit group that runs science enrichment programs for the children of public housing. The educator was amazed that so many of these children who are living on Water Street – probably less than the length of a football field away from the water’s edge – how many of these children had never seen a horseshoe crab, a sea star, an oyster shell. Many of these children are from single-parent homes; they are part of our 44% free and reduced lunch population you have heard about.

This same science educator was telling me about another program at one of our elementary schools where fourth graders get a field trip - by boat -- to one of the Norwalk Islands. Several children on this particular field trip were frightened; the organizers estimated that half of these 4<sup>th</sup> graders had never been on a boat before. So you might envision in your mind Norwalk as a wealthy, waterside community with a lot of boat owners – but the reality is we have lots of ten-year-old children who have never had the opportunity to be on any kind of boat, even a canoe at camp.

These are many of the children who make up our school population. I ask you to keep in mind these Norwalk kids in mind as you make your decisions about the ECS funding and its fairness.

Within half a mile from Water Street is our homeless shelter, with a section set aside to provide shelter for families who have no home. The children attend our schools and we continue to educate them when they have moved into their new apartment. But there are always more homeless families moving in behind them in the shelter.

We have a community health center which provides routine health care to more than 13,000 underinsured or uninsured patients. The poverty level in Norwalk is 6.2 percent greater than the Connecticut average. \* Does that sound like wealth?

I have worked in one of Norwalk's 19 schools for the past 13 years in our Family Resource Center. Last winter, we had a new third grader; he had just arrived from Mexico. He arrived with just 2 months of formal schooling; less education than most of our three-year-olds in Connecticut. So as his teacher was preparing the rest of her third grade class to take the CMTs in March, she was also faced with the challenge of teaching Juan the alphabet, in addition to reading, writing and math in English. This year the teacher had 23 students in her class; small class size is one of the strategies we use to improve test scores. Next year this teacher will be facing similar challenges with nearly 30 children in her class because our city is laying off teachers. Norwalk can no longer afford to meet the rising costs of education.

Yesterday, I helped a Dad enroll his son in our school. His son, a fifth grader, has recently arrived from Haiti, he speaks Creole and French, no English. Our one part-time outreach worker who speaks Creole – she serves all 19 of our public schools -- she has recently lost her job in the most recent rounds of budget cuts.

In our elementary school, 31 percent of our children come from homes where English is not the primary language. 24 different languages are spoken by our families; including Creole, Polish, Chinese, Teluga and Bengali.

You can imagine the many cultures and countries that are represented -- each with a different idea about education, school, expectations, even homework and what it is. If you are a working parent, you know personally how difficult it can be to help your child with his or her homework after a long work day. Now imagine that you are working two jobs, not one, to help make ends meet. Now imagine the homework is in Mandarin Chinese or some other language that you do not know. Now imagine that you yourself have only had the benefit of completing the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in your home country.

This is the daily reality for many of our immigrant families. To help their children, we have a homework program after school where kids can get extra help completing their homework. Our school librarian coordinates the program – her job – as well as the librarian in each of our schools has been eliminated in our most recent round of budget cuts. We have been through weeks of negotiations to try to restore these positions.

I could tell you many, many more stories about the needs of Norwalk families. Families where the children love going to school because at least they know they will be in a building with heat for 6 hours. Where the kids know they will at least have breakfast and lunch. I am going to guess that for many of us parents in this room, our kids have the luxury of their own bedroom. I know of instances in our city where each family gets its own bedroom; multiple families share the kitchen and bathroom of an apartment. Whether this is legal or not is not the issue here tonight. The issue is whether the children of these families are getting an equal education.

Thank you, Rep. Lavielle, for bringing the needs of Norwalk to the forefront. I urge every committee member to listen to some of her proposals to make the ECS formula fair for cities where there is disparity between property values and median household income. Please take a look at refining the formula to account for communities with large numbers of English Language Learners. These children and adults require additional resources to become successful citizens. We also need an accurate way to include the poverty levels in the formula.

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\* <http://www.areavibes.com/norwalk-ct/employment/>