NEWS

"If there was no suffering, man would not know his limits, would not know himself."
WAR AND PEACE LEO TOLSTOY

New Haven students lobby in Hartford for more public school funds

BY SABRINA THALER AND EVELYN RONAN
STAFF REPORTERS

HARTFORD — The Legislative Office Building in Hartford was unusually busy on Wednesday, one month into the ongoing legislative session.

A throng of high schoolers visiting from across the state — including more than 100 New Haven Public Schools students — crowded underneath the vaulted glass ceiling of the building's lobby, backpacks in tow. As teacher chaperones corralled the crowd, students approached Mayor Justin Elicker for photos.

For the second year in a row, the mayor's office partnered with New Haven Public Schools to bring students to visit the state capitol and advocate for increased education funding from the state. According to Monica Abbott, the district's social emotional learning coordinator who helped organize the trip, a total of 111 students traveled to the capitol, along with students from nine other Connecticut school districts.

This year, district advocacy focused on support for Senate Bill 7, "An Act Concerning Educational Equity," on which the Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee held a public hearing Wednesday.

The legislation, which was sponsored by Senate President Pro Tempore Martin Looney, who represents parts of New Haven and Hamden, would raise the state's per-student foundation amount for the first time in more than a decade — an update that New Haven education activists have long said would be necessary to achieve educational equity in Connecticut.

"Our local leaders have acknowledged that the urgency of this issue is serious. They have already taken steps to help allocate additional funding to our schools. But local action alone cannot solve a statewide problem," Diana Robles, a 12th grader at New Haven's High School in the Community and an intern with the New Haven Federation of Teachers, said at a crowded press conference at the capitol Wednesday morning. Other speakers included Elicker, Hartford Mayor Arunan Arulampalam and the superintendent of Bridgeport Public Schools.

The legislation, which was designed to increase funding for public schools, would change the formula Connecticut uses to calculate per-student aid through the Education Cost Sharing formula. The central proposal of the bill is raising the formula's foundation amount, or the baseline per-student cost used to calculate how much funding the district will receive.

The formula's funding amount has remained at $11,525 per student since 2013, which means that schools are being funded with budget assessments that do not account for inflation and what districts say are rising staffing costs. According to a December report from the School + State Finance Project, these factors have grossly outpaced Education Cost Sharing growth.

Senate Bill 7 would raise the formula's per-student foundation amount in increments of $1,000 each year until it reaches $15,500 in 2030. After that point, the foundation would increase at a rate proportional to inflation or increases in "personal income."

State Senator Douglas McCrory, a co-sponsor of the bill, said the proposed increase would benefit school districts across Connecticut, including New Haven's.

"Every school district will benefit from the ECS increase," McCrory said in a phone interview. "New Haven's benefit level will likely be in the neighborhood of $6 or $7 million."

McCrory described the formula tweak as the first in a series of legislative moves to shift the fiscal burden away from local governments and revise existing state education policy.

"This is the beginning of a set of bills. There are other issues we haven't addressed within this bill that need additional attention like special education," he said.

Only about 36 percent of Connecticut schools' funding comes from the state. The majority comes from local property taxes, which advocates say leads to funding disparities between urban districts like New Haven and wealthier towns.



SABRINA THALER / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Over 100 New Haven high school students took buses to Hartford on Wednesday morning to advocate for state legislation that would update the state's per-student education payment.

On the bus ride up to Hartford, Ben Scudder, a history teacher at High School in the Community and a member of the New Haven Federation of Teachers, handed students American Federation of Teachers-branded stickers reading "Fix the Formula" and distributed copies of a one-page guide designed to help them advocate for the bill, which included an explanation of the formula. Throughout the ride, Scudder explained the details of the formula and Senate Bill 7's proposal to different groups of students.

In an interview on the bus ride, Scudder said that increased state funding was a point of agreement for the city and its teachers union, which have had a history of "ugly debates" about public school funding on the local level, he noted.

"We all acknowledge — the Board of Ed, the district, the union, everyone — the fact is that we're underfunded from the state," Scudder said. "We have been for years, maybe forever."

At a January budget forum, NHPS Chief Finance Officer Amilcar Hernandez claimed that if the formula were to reflect present-day inflation rates, it would increase to $16,000 per student. Scudder said that while Senate Bill 7 ensures it would near this value in 2030, its phased structure may push the district "behind the curve" in the intervening years.

In testimony to the Education Committee, Abdellah Aly, a student representative on the New Haven Board of Education, restated the $16,000 figure, noting that the difference between the current and inflation-adjusted per-student cost amounted to millions of dollars for big school districts like New Haven, leaving gaps school districts are left to make up.

"Those costs don't just disappear, but instead, the districts are forced to make difficult decisions," Aly told the Committee. "They can increase class sizes, they can delay infrastructure improvement, they can reduce or get rid of academic support programs and put pressure on local property taxes."

At least five New Haven students attending Wednesday's event at the capitol described poor school infrastructure as an issue that increased state funding could help remedy.

Yahaira Roman, a senior at Wilbur Cross High School, referred to yellowed, water-damaged ceilings throughout her school. Her classmate, Anahy Nophal, described bathrooms with only one working water fountain.

Justin Harmon, a spokesperson for New Haven Public Schools, told the News in an October interview that the district currently lacks the resources to be able "do regular, ongoing preventive maintenance" in its schools.

Connecticut's Education Cost Sharing formula took effect in 1989.

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Alders debate administrators' pay before OK'ing new school contracts

BY NELLIE KENNEY
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Alders clashed over a pay raise for school administrators as they voted to approve new union contracts on Wednesday.

In January, New Haven's Board of Education voted unanimously to approve new contracts with the New Haven Federation of Teachers and the School Administrators Association. The teachers' contract includes a 13.5 percent bump in teacher salaries over the next three years, as well as smaller class sizes and a new healthcare plan for teachers. The administrators' contract includes a 9.6 percent pay increase in the next three years.

The contracts, which were approved by the Board of Alders, will take effect on July 1.

While the teachers' union contract received unanimous support, alders were split on whether to approve a pay raise for administrators, with those opposed citing already-high salaries. Alders Elias Theodore '27 and Sarah Miller '03 urged their colleagues to oppose the contract. Ultimately, 18 alders voted in favor and 10 voted against.

Theodore, who represents the downtown Ward 1, explained that his experience as a student at Wilbur Cross High School in New Haven informed his vote. His Spanish teacher left the school partway through his junior year to take on a position in Norwalk that offered better pay and health care benefits, Theodore said.

He added that in his experience at Wilbur Cross, "assistant principal positions, those administrative positions, are highly sought after. And I think they are incredibly competitive with other urban districts in the state."

"When we have a teacher shortage and buildings that are falling apart, I think the top is a logical place to, not even cut back, but just not increase spending," Theodore said, adding that his position was "not a comment on these people's contribution and performance."

Miller, who represents Fair Haven's Ward 14, agreed, citing financial concerns.

"We have a deficit," she said of New Haven Public Schools. "We're struggling to cover really basic needs of the district, and under those circumstances, we should only do the things that we really have to do, that are focused on kids, and this to me is not one of those."

At a Monday budget workshop, NHPS Chief Financial Officer Amilcar Hernandez said that the district has exceeded its current $213 million budget by $8.9 million and has spent an additional $10 million on contract increases, leaving them with a total deficit of $18.9 million.

"Teachers' contracts must be our priority, since it is they who teach our students, and we have faced critical shortages in the past few years. That said, most of our administrators also work in schools; they tend to be former teachers," Justin Harmon, a spokesperson for the school district, wrote to the News. "Their new compensation package shows a lower rate of increase than does the teachers'. We are trying our best to be fair to all concerned and to keep our talent in New Haven."

Ward 25 Alder Adam Marchand GRD '99, who represents Westville and chairs the board's Finance Committee, acknowledged that school administrators make "really good salaries" but said that post-pandemic inflation justified "them getting strong raises." The Finance Committee had voted to recommend the contracts for approval in February.

When Marchand thinks about the administrators' contract, he thinks about the principals and assistant principals at his kids' schools, he said.

"I know that the work that they do is critical. It's a very difficult job," he added.

Fellow Finance Committee member and Board of Alders President Tyisha Walker-Myers echoed Marchand's sentiments.

"Everybody — it doesn't matter how much they get paid — deserves a little more," she said, adding that the union "negotiated a fair contract."

Ward 9 Alder Caroline Tanbee Smith '14 SOM '25, who represents parts of East Rock and Fair Haven, also voted in favor of the contract. She said that because of inflation, administrators experienced "negative real wage change" despite increases in salaries in the previous contract.

"My understanding is the reason why it was marginally higher in part is because there were real wage losses over the last year's contract," she said.

Alders agreed that teacher retention was a major concern for the district. New Haven is currently short on teachers. The New Haven Register reported in August that the district was entering the 2025-2026 school year with 87 certified teacher vacancies.

"I'm hoping that we're able to retain teachers with more competitive wages, and that we are able to fill those vacancies," Ward 13 Alder Mildred Melendez, who represents Fair Haven Heights, said. "Teachers are the most important part, right? We need someone in the classroom to teach kids."

Marchand agreed, describing New Haven's teachers as "underpaid" and noting that "we don't have enough of them." He said the school district's teacher retention problem was "much like" the difficulties with officer retention that preceded a 2024 salary increase in the New Haven Police Department union's contract.

In January, Mayor Justin Elicker said that the teachers union "drove a hard bargain," gesturing to "real financial constraints" on the city, although he agreed that teachers should be paid more. On Feb. 27, Elicker presented a proposed city budget for the next fiscal year, which included a $5 million boost in funding to public schools for a total school budget of around $218 million.

New Haven Public Schools employs 2,500 full-time employees, according to the school district's website.



AYMAN NASEER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The new teachers' union contract includes a 13.5 percent increase in teacher pay over the course of the next three years. The new administrators' contract includes a 9.6 percent increase in the same time frame.

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