



**TESTIMONY OF HAMLET M. HERNANDEZ
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS
BRANFORD, CONNECTICUT**

IN REFERENCE TO:

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF THE ALTERATION EXTENSION PROJECT OF WALSH
INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL MARCH 1, 2017.**

Dear Representative Fleischmann, Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Senator Bye, Senator Sommers and Representative Sanchez:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of the *Alteration Extension* project of Walsh Intermediate School in Branford, CT.

I have served as the Superintendent of Schools in Branford since July of 2010. Even before my tenure began in Branford, the intermediate school's antiquated open-space design had been discussed, studied and debated locally. Over the past seven years, this long awaited school construction project has coalesced into the next generation intermediate school.

The current building design is not conducive for optimal learning for children in grades five through eight. The school was built in 1971 with the open-space model, which has proven to be inadequate in Branford and other towns. Teachers literally delineated classroom spaces by creating barriers between instructional spaces. The current instructional space substantially impedes learning for students and does not permit the next generation school's Team design which fosters collaboration, creativity, inquiry and student-centered instruction.

In addition to the current haphazard instructional space design, the lack of natural light is remarkable. Students rarely see the light of day nor do they experience the cognitive benefits of natural light permeating throughout the school. The combination of open-space, severely limited light and significant noise due to the open design, create a labyrinth environment rather than a learning environment.

The next generation intermediate school's specifications are flexible and focus on the developmental needs of children in grades five through eight by using the "Team" structure for each grade level. The Team concept permits each child to be part of a group of students who receive instruction from a core team of teachers. In addition, the next generation school recognizes the distinct developmental needs of students in grade five and six by assigning them to one floor and grade seven and eight students to a different floor. Similar to students collaborating, teachers continuously improve their pedagogy and curriculum by collegial collaboration in the Instructional Coaching Lab Classroom. The design strongly facilitates collaboration amongst students and teachers, something the current building woefully lacks.

The concept of designing a school fostering collaboration and personalized learning were at the center of the project. The alteration/extension project calls for a media center to be the hub of the school. The design embraces the use of technology as a "learning-multiplier" with each student accessing a plethora of information, experiences and cultures through the school's connectivity to the information highway. This becomes increasingly important as the District experiences a steady increase of children living in poverty. In 2010, the District had 20 percent of children qualifying for the Federal Lunch program. Today, the District eligibility stands at 27 percent and it continues to increase.

The education program for the next generation building includes comprehensive special education programs that allow children who might otherwise be educated in a different school to be educated with their peers. The school continues to expand "unified" extra-curricular activities and last year the "Unified" community was recognized by CT Association of Schools for their outstanding work with children with disabilities. Unlike a typical intermediate school in CT, the Branford intermediate school recently went through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) accreditation process. The report acknowledges the instructional challenges stemming from the open-space design and recommends any future school organize for learning in a more effective manner.

The Branford Public Building Commission work with the Office of School Construction Grants and Review (OSCG&R) resulted in building significantly smaller than the current building. Representatives from OSCG&R visited the intermediate school in November and because of their visit the District's application was even further refined. The

OSCG&R representative experienced the outdated instructional design, lack of natural lighting, high noise levels and inefficient operating systems.

Our community is very supportive of the intermediate school construction project as evidenced by a funding commitment with the proviso the State provide grant funding in the amount of \$30,385,909. Branford's changing demographics coupled with an outdated intermediate school design elevates the timeliness of this project and should it be approved, the conditions for positive and improved outcomes for all children is set for decades.

Thank you Representative Fleischmann, Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Senator Bye, Senator Sommers and Representative Sanchez for allowing me to submit this testimony.

Hamlet M. Hernandez
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Branford Public Schools
March 1, 2017