

Testimony of Sheena Graham
Before the Education Committee
Regarding SB 390 AAC Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention
March 9, 2020

Good afternoon, members of the Education Committee.

My name is Sheena Graham. I have been an educator for 37 years, 35 of them in my current district of Bridgeport. I am Connecticut's 2019 Teacher of the Year.

Thank you for considering Senate Bill 390 (AAC Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention.)

For Connecticut to have a teaching force as diverse as its students, based on data from 2018-2019, it means hiring over 19,000 minority teachers. At the current rate of adding 102 new minority teachers a year and factoring in how many leave, it would take over 180 years to do so. Retaining the minority teachers we currently have while continuing to recruit is essential, but it depends on addressing working conditions, financial inequities, and offering both salaries and health benefits that keep up with inflation.

I left teaching in Bridgeport for two years due to poor working conditions. My classroom did not have windows. The intake for the vent was in a garage. Truck delivery fumes and other odors lived in my classroom. I grew a lump on my neck that had to be surgically removed. Fortunately, it was benign. I've taught in classrooms where the students and I wore our coats due to lack of heat, and rooms where nosebleeds were common due to intense heat. I've dealt with large class sizes squished into too little space, too little planning time, too few social workers and too few counselors to handle the social emotional needs of our students. All of this equals stressful working conditions that are not recruitment- or retention-friendly.

Financial inequities for me have meant having to work more than one job, and as many as four jobs, my entire teaching career, having my utilities cut off more than once, going without the correct prescription in my eyeglasses for over four years, paying just the interest on school loans (the balance never gets lower), and having to choose between caring for ill parents or providing for my children. All of these are conditions that are not recruitment- or retention-friendly.

My first African American female educator in high school made me realize I could be a teacher. Her presence in the classroom made a difference in my future. Recently I found out a current teacher in my district, a former student who is African American and Hispanic, said I did the same for him. A task force to address the stated issues will help this trend to continue on a larger scale.

I am hopeful that legislators will move forward positively with this bill.

Thank you.