

Testimony of Marquis Johnson, Windsor teacher
Before the Education Committee
Regarding S.B. 390: An Act Concerning Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention
March 9, 2020

Senator Douglas McCrory, Representative Robert Sanchez, and distinguished members of the Education Committee:

I am an educator, and I am here in support of S.B. 390: AN ACT CONCERNING MINORITY TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION.

In connection to this topic, it is important to note that in general, the teaching profession is in crisis. As you may know, some of these challenges include underfunding, inadequate teacher training, low salary, curricular constraints, mental and emotional exhaustion, ineffective disciplinary and academic interventions, lack of diversity among faculty, overtesting, public mistrust, time constraints, and keeping up with an ever-changing society. In fact, the need for this bill is evidence of a very public awareness of this crisis. If we are to increase minority recruitment and retention, we must come to understand the distinct ways in which these challenges affect marginalized communities. These challenges often have a more devastating impact on minority groups. Consequently, there are higher stakes for minority members who wish to enter the teaching profession. I believe that the task force proposed by the bill will have an opportunity to educate us all about these barriers so that we can make informed action plans.

I am equally excited to hear that this bill will encourage high school students to think about pursuing a teaching career. Additionally, I would like the committee to consider incentives that will address the challenges that minority students are confronted with as they relate to entering and remaining in this profession.

As an eighth grade teacher, I often have students come back to visit me. When I mention teaching as an option, they raise many concerns. They are worried about their ability to financially support themselves and their families. They fear for their physical and mental well-being. They are troubled by the idea of being in yet another institution where they will be marginalized due to the lack of diversity. I know these concerns are real, because they are the same grievances expressed by me and other educators of color. One very talented educator told me that he left the formal school setting because “the educational environment would be a violence to [his] emotional and physical self.” Not only must we create incentives for minority students to enter the profession, but we must make sure that the school buildings are environments that professionals want to be in.

This work starts early. My K-12 education prepared me with many skills and tools for life. I grew up with a love for science and dreams of changing the world by helping our youth. Oddly enough, teaching was the last career that I thought I would pursue, because I did not see people who looked like me at the front of the room, nor did the curriculum lend itself to my cultural experience. As early as kindergarten, it was common for me to see students of color being subjected to incessant disciplinary action. Regardless of intention, the message was clear - I was not welcome. Therefore, I did not believe that I belonged or even had a stake in this arena.

Twenty years later, my current and past students express similar feelings about this profession based on their K-12 experiences. It is for this reason that I urge the proposed task force to seek understanding about how the full K-12 experience often causes many minority students to be reluctant about becoming school educators. It is my belief that improving these experiences will help increase minority recruitment.

I am proud of the work I have done for the past eight years as an educator. The challenges I face, especially as a teacher of color, often make the job feel impossible but I have stayed in the fight for my students. Through my work, I have learned that all students need positive role models from diverse backgrounds. Though I have found some ways to endure the challenges of this profession, I know that it is very possible to create an educational environment that is far more welcoming for minority students and professionals.

It is almost exactly one year later since my first time in front of you, testifying on behalf of HB 7082: AN ACT CONCERNING THE INCLUSION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

That bill, much like this one, addressed the issues of inclusion within our public schools. To hear that it passed made me feel proud to be an educator in Connecticut. We make it evident through our actions that we value diversity, understanding that it is necessary for a more complete educational experience. Passing S.B. 390 will once again demonstrate our willingness to take the necessary steps to ensure that our schools are places where everyone is welcome.