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Testimony to support parent representation on the Board of Education

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My name is Gabriella Fernando. I am a resident of Ward 7. I live at 455 Orange Street. As an undergraduate student at Yale University, I am an after-school teacher at Yale's Peabody Museum, which serves New Haven public high school students.

Last week I shared data with you regarding non-citizen parents in the New Haven Public Schools, to demonstrate the importance of allowing non-citizens to serve on the Board of Education and all city boards and commissions. Today I will provide some insight in support of reserving at least 2 seats on New Haven's Board of Education for parents of current NHPS students.

***14 out of the 23 members of the NYC school board are parents of current NYC public school students.***

I am a proud product of New York City's public school system, where I was a student from grades K-12. Although New York City is home to the largest school system in our nation, and much larger than New Haven's school district, I still find many similarities between New Haven public schools and New York's, primarily in the socioeconomic experiences of students. **In both cities**, students are especially economically disadvantaged. As of 2022, nearly 72% of New York City public school students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>1</sup> In New Haven, this percentage is 74%, as of the same year.<sup>2</sup> **In both cities**, students are overwhelmingly Black and Brown. 41% of New York City public school students are Latinx and nearly 25% are Black. 48% of New Haven public school students are Latinx and 34% are Black. **In both cities**, many students are immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants. 14% of New York City students are English-language learners. In New Haven, 20% are.<sup>3</sup> **In both cities**, a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/doe-data-at-a-glance>

<sup>2</sup>

[https://public-edsight.ct.gov/Students/Enrollment-Dashboard/Free-and-Reduced-Price-Meal-Eligibility-Export?language=en\\_US](https://public-edsight.ct.gov/Students/Enrollment-Dashboard/Free-and-Reduced-Price-Meal-Eligibility-Export?language=en_US)

<sup>3</sup>

[https://public-edsight.ct.gov/Students/Enrollment-Dashboard/Enrollment-Report-Legacy?language=en\\_US](https://public-edsight.ct.gov/Students/Enrollment-Dashboard/Enrollment-Report-Legacy?language=en_US)

notable portion of students have disabilities. 20% of New York City public school students are enrolled in a special education program. Nearly 16% of NHPS students are.

Despite these similarities in demographics, New York City has given the parents of such a diverse student population power and voice within the school board, while New Haven has failed to do so. Why should some parents matter more than others? When no seats are reserved for parents, you get school boards where the only member who is actually a parent in the schools they make life-changing decisions for is the mayor. Out of the seven members on New Haven's Board of Education, Mayor Elicker is the only one who is supposed to represent the experiences of New Haven parents—which is impossible in such a diverse school district. **Of New York City's 23 education board members, 9 are required to be reserved for parents: at least one parent from each borough, at least one parent of a student with learning disabilities, at least one parent of a student learning English as a second language, and at least one parent of a student with a significant learning challenge.** While 9 members are required to be parents, such prioritization and empowerment of public school families have yielded a school board where 14 of 23 members (or over 60%) are current parents. NHPS parents must also be told their voices matter, and you can start to achieve this by voting to reserve just 2 seats for parents.

I believe that the Board of Education should be more representative of NHPS parents and families. I support the following reforms:

- ☐ Two seats on the BOE should be reserved for parents/guardians of current NHPS students.
- ☐ The mayor should not hold a seat on the BOE. (There should be a separation of powers. None of the major cities in Connecticut has a school board with a mayoral seat.)
- ☐ Immigrants should be allowed to serve on the Board of Education and on all city commissions. (One in five students at NHPS are multilingual learners, and most of them have parents who are non-citizens, but currently non-citizens cannot serve on city boards and commissions unless they apply for a special waiver.)

I thank you for your time and consideration and I hope that the Board of Education can evolve to best serve and reflect the interests of all NHPS students. Other cities in this nation have purposefully and successfully empowered parents and families to be leaders in the decision-making processes that directly impact the children they care for. You all have the opportunity to show the parents of New Haven that their voices matter too.

Thank you for considering my testimony.