

TESTIMONY OF THE
CONNECTICUT COALITION
FOR ***JUSTICE***
IN EDUCATION FUNDING
TO THE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

March 9, 2009

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates this opportunity to submit comments pertinent to **SB 830 — An Act Concerning the Governor's Recommendations Regarding Education**.

Rather than address the many shortcomings of this bill, we confine our remarks here to a few provisions that would have especially negative impact on the educational opportunity afforded Connecticut public schoolchildren:

- **Section 20 — Make every effort to increase the FY10 and FY11 ECS allocations by at least 4.4% each year, over and above the currently funded FY09 level.** This level of ECS increase over the biennium should help combat what otherwise will be severely damaging cuts in teachers and essential support personnel, curricular and extracurricular programs, instructional materials and technology, and all other services that effective schools necessarily provide to meet the needs of their students and to fully comply with state and federal mandates.
- **Sections 1-7 — Remove the funding caps on school health services, adult education, pupil transportation, bilingual education, RESC operations, and special education contained in this bill.** Reinstating the cap on Special Education Excess Cost reimbursements after having just lifted it for FY08 and FY09 is one giant step backward in the equitable funding of mandated services to schoolchildren. Rather than lowering the reimbursement threshold from 4.5 times a district's regular program per pupil expenditure and fully funding the grant, the Governor's budget proposes to leave the high threshold and reduce the state's support by \$22.6 million (as compared with the State Department of Education's modest request to increase the grant by \$15.1 million over FY09). This clearly shifts more of the SPED burden back to local boards of education and their municipalities.
- **Sections 8 and 14 — Restore and fully fund the interdistrict magnet per pupil increases for FY10 and FY11 that are currently written in statute.** Whether the magnet school is operated by a RESC or the local school district in which it is located, holding per pupil allocations at the FY09 level will jeopardize the well-being of these innovative and highly successful models of regional collaboration and voluntary

desegregation. (Note that even the increased amounts would be significantly lower than what realistically constitutes “adequate funding” for magnet students.) Also, **eliminate any ECS reduction in need student counts for local school districts that have students attending interdistrict magnet schools**; their students’ participation in interdistrict magnets seldom decreases the fixed expenditures of sending districts. Moreover, the ECS reductions especially jeopardize the New Haven “host model” magnet schools that have successfully operated across the state for 15 years without supplemental funding by the legislature, and other host magnet operators harbor similar concerns.

- **Section 18 — Continue to support and expand Project Choice within all Connecticut’s urban areas.** In the Greater Hartford area, this program has a long and proud record of changing students’ lives and promoting racial/cultural diversity. The \$2500 per pupil grant to receiving districts should be raised to a level that more realistically approximates the additional cost of academically remediating, socially/emotionally integrating, and otherwise successfully serving Project Choice students. Appropriately incentivizing suburban districts would bolster suburban districts’ willing acceptance of these deserving out-of-district learners.
- **Other — Increase Priority District funding to \$132.9 million as recommended by the State Department of Education, versus the Governor’s proposed \$116.7 million.** These dollars are vital in helping the state’s most distressed districts “tread water” as they struggle to improve practices and serve their highly disadvantaged populations. Also, restore the \$20 million Early Reading Success grant that targets Priority Districts’ most at-risk young students.

CCJEF members fully recognize that the General Assembly is now faced with exceedingly difficult choices in devising a suitable biennium budget. Nevertheless, equal and meaningful educational opportunity in a state with the nation’s worst achievement gap will not come without substantially greater investment. There is no better economic stimulus — both short- and long-term — than investing in public education. Today’s children are tomorrow’s workforce, taxpayers, and future leaders.

The Governor’s proposed “level funding” of the ECS at first glance appears generous. However, it masks the serious fiscal toll and probable erosion of program quality that such action would exact within most school districts. Level funding means a 4 to 6 percent budget cut for most districts, resulting in a reduction of essential personnel, increases in class sizes, the reduction or elimination of valuable curricular and extracurricular offerings, a steep lessening of the ability to provide effective intervention/remediation for learners who need help the most, and the undermining of schools’ continuous improvement efforts.

Alternatively, level funding of the ECS merely transfers the fiscal crisis to already overburdened cities and towns. Property tax rates are already maxed out in communities of every wealth, and grand lists in many municipalities are on the decline, while unemployment and foreclosures continue to rise. Municipalities cannot, nor should they be expected to, continue to carry such a high share of the financial burden for the funding of their schools.

Devising an effective school finance system that equitably distributes adequate funding for all schoolchildren will require reforming the state's revenue structures — including placing a greater reliance on progressive tax measures and less reliance on property taxes, while also creating mechanisms that ensure stable and adequate funding of schools. Accordingly, we call upon Education Committee members to help lead the General Assembly toward long overdue tax restructuring/revenue rebalancing. The recent proposal by Better Choices for Connecticut, for example, points in the right direction for revenue enhancements that would also improve the equity of the state's tax system.

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The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) is a broad-based coalition of municipalities, local boards of education, statewide professional education associations, unions, and other pro-education advocacy organizations, parents and Connecticut schoolchildren aged 18 or older, and other taxpayers. Member school communities serve more than 250,000 students, including approximately three-fourths of Connecticut's minority students, those from low-income homes, and students from homes where English is not the primary language.