

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

March 10, 2008

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates this opportunity to submit written comments pertinent to a few of the bills before you today.

As most of you are already aware, CCJEF is a broad-based coalition of parents, education associations, child-focused advocacy organizations, and urban, suburban, and rural communities across the state who are committed to improving the fiscal infrastructure of public education so as to ensure equal educational opportunity for all children, regardless of family or community wealth. To that end, CCJEF also advocates for systemic tax/revenue reform to enable the state to adequately and equitably provide its fair share of funding for the schools, thereby lifting the heavy burden from local property taxes. CCJEF communities are home to some 40 percent of the state's population, and they provide public education for more than 200,000 children, including about two-thirds of the state's poor, minority, and limited-English students.

First, a general comment, aimed primarily at **House Bill No. 5026, An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations Regarding Education and Raised Bill No. 614, An Act Concerning the Recommendations by the Legislative Commissioners for Technical Revisions to Education Statutes:**

- CCJEF recognizes that under the current tax structure and the state spending cap, and given the anticipated downturn in state revenues, significant changes to the FY09 budget will be difficult, and that therefore most of the urgently needed school finance improvements cannot be achieved at this particular time.

Nevertheless, we ask that you make every effort to increase the 2008-09 ECS allocation above the currently budgeted 4.4% increase over last year. Otherwise, it will be unlikely, if not altogether impossible, for the state to meet the promised 5-year phase-in that should result in an additional \$1.1 billion in annual ECS funding. Overall, the 2007-08 ECS increase amounted to just 11.2% over the previous (base) year, despite last year's huge budget surplus. Thus the state has already failed to implement an equal-interval phase-in, a fact that does not bode well for the future.

As the attached tables show, on average, municipalities have suffered a 24% decrease in the value of ECS per pupil entitlements over the past dozen years. In Shelton, that decrease in purchasing power has been more than 52%. This year's 4.4% increase, plus the projected 2008-09 increase of another 4.4%, will raise the state's per pupil allocation to Shelton schoolchildren by a total of just \$70, a truly insignificant amount toward a school budget that exceeds \$100 million. The same insignificant 2-year increase pertains to Newtown, and a similar pattern exists in Stamford and Norwalk, whose 2-year increases amount to less than \$125 per pupil, despite their large at-risk student populations. Nor are these the only communities receiving but token increases in ECS aid. Moreover, even where substantial percentage increases have been realized, as in many of the higher-wealth towns, the resulting per pupil entitlement nevertheless remains unconscionably low.

Thus, 30 years after *Horton v Meskill*, nearly one-third of all towns are budgeted to receive FY09 equalization grants worth less than the purchasing power of the \$250 per pupil flat grant they received from the state in 1977!

Anything this Committee can do to accelerate the move toward substantially greater state funding of education is both urgently needed and welcome. The state's continued reliance on local communities for the lion's share of funding for their public schools is simply untenable, and, we believe, unconstitutional.

- Directly pertinent to **Bill No. 5026**, we ask that you restore the Governor's proposed \$1.8 million decrease in Priority District funding. Inasmuch as these districts have rightly been determined to be the state's neediest, any decrease in their funding will further erode the quality of services these towns and their schools are able to provide schoolchildren.
- At future public hearings during this short session, you will also be hearing CCJEF advocate for lowering the special education excess cost grant threshold to 2.5 times the cost of a regular-program student, as well as for fully funding the pupil transportation and adult education grants.

Second, CCJEF supports, in principle, **Senate Bills 644, An Act Concerning a Study of the Open Choice Program, and 645, An Act Concerning a Study of Issues Concerning the Interdistrict Magnet School Program.**

- However, we point to other task forces, commissions, and studies that have already been conducted or are currently underway, including a magnet cost study that will soon be released by CCJEF that will clearly show that successfully integrated and well-implemented magnet programs require considerably more operating funds than are currently being made available by the state or are otherwise affordable to participating towns.
- Last session, the magnet funding formula was changed to reduce state aid for the magnets by some 50%, beginning with a 25% reduction in "need student" counts in FY09 for both sending and receiving towns. Estimates are that with the 25% ECS need student count reduction, the state will save \$25.9 million, and that the 50% cut will save \$51.8 million. The brunt of these cuts impacts 18 urban school districts affiliated with the Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents, most of which are also CCJEF members. These urban districts are expected to lose \$16 million in ECS aid in FY09 and \$45 million in FY10 unless this statute is immediately amended or repealed.

- CCJEF wishes to emphasize just how devastating this further reduction in need student counts could be to the urban districts, which already had their need student counts reduced this year as a result of dropping the 25% weighting for students performing below proficiency on the state's mastery tests. Yet these cities are key to carrying out the state's voluntary desegregation principles; they both provide and participate in valuable magnet programs and the Open Choice program. New Haven alone stands to lose millions over the coming years, and its exemplary host magnet program, which even predates the *Sheff* decision and serves as a model among cities of its size nationally, could be put at jeopardy unless this unfortunate policy is fixed. We therefore urge that any additional studies that are undertaken include appropriate representation by New Haven and the other CAUS districts.

Third, with reference to **Raised Bill No 647, An Act Concerning Charter Schools**, CCJEF raises the question as to why these few small schools, which enroll only about 0.6% of Connecticut's public school students, continue to garner such policy attention and increased funding, particularly given the urgency of additional state aid to the regular public school districts that serve 95.5% of the state's public school students.

- Every dollar that goes to charter schools represents more than a dollar that is not going to the urban public schools in which these charters are located. Not only do the local public school districts lose those students from their ECS count, but also their taxpayers must pick up the cost of charter school transportation, SPED, and other hidden charter subsidies, all of which get added to the cost of doing business for the public school district rather than to the cost of the charters themselves, to which all related costs clearly ought to revert before the legislature and public view and compare education expenditures.
- Moreover, this Committee's attention needs to be drawn to the fact that those charters that are most persistently aggressive in seeking additional seats and site expansion actually serve very few high-needs/high-cost students (English-language learners and special education students), certainly far below the proportion of these children within the local urban populations from which the charters draw their students. This would appear to be in defiance of the state's policies requiring charter schools to contribute toward reducing racial/ethnic and economic isolation. Nor is there sound evidence, in Connecticut or on a national scale, that charter students out-perform their local public school peers once student characteristics, class size, hours of schooling, and other factors are controlled for — factors that urban districts do not have the funding luxury to provide, the legal ability to put into place and enforce, or any desire to ever deny services to children regardless how great their learning needs.

Finally, CCJEF urges that no new education requirements be mandated this year unless the local costs of implementing the new mandates are fully paid for by the state. We also urge you and your fellow General Assembly colleagues to reject proposals for property tax caps, which inevitably impinge upon the ability of municipalities to raise local funds for their schools — unless and until state aid to the public schools is increased to an adequate and equitable level for all 169 communities.

Thank you for your consideration. For further information, please contact Dr. Dianne Kaplan deVries, CCJEF Project Director, at (860) 461-0320, or dianne@ccjef.org.

Attachments: Inflation-Adjusted Change in ECS Entitlements Over Past 12 Years
Projected Changes in ECS Entitlements, FY 06-07 through FY 08-09