

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

BEFORE THE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

**Regional Information Meeting
Ledyard High School**

March 21, 2006

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding thanks the Education Committee for holding this regional opportunity for citizens of Eastern Connecticut to come before you this evening. Although our comments herein represent the full membership of CCJEF, this testimony is especially reflective of the needs and concerns of our many Eastern Connecticut member towns, boards of education, and other constituencies with regard to the ECS and the state's system of school funding. We also refer the Committee to our earlier testimony filed this session on March 3, March 7, and March 17, 2006.

First and foremost, let us begin by emphasizing that the Governor's proposed budget amounts to little more than flat funding for education aid to cities and towns. Eastern Connecticut school districts struggle to sustain even maintenance budgets, even as their towns try to contend with the increasingly heavy burden of funding their schools and the heavy impact on rising property tax rates. The Governor's budget will do nothing to alleviate the heavy property tax burden of the schools, which in many Eastern Connecticut communities amounts to 60 to 80 percent of the local budget while still falling far short of providing the resources necessary for student success, given the state's low contribution to that effort.

More importantly to this Committee, the Governor's budget will not contribute toward closing the achievement gap or better preparing Eastern Connecticut students to successfully compete in the global marketplace or be well equipped for the high wage/high skills jobs that will be offered by the kinds of industries that are desperately needed in this region. Her budget proposal will not result in more of our students being adequately prepared to pursue post-secondary education without the need for costly and time-consuming remediation in our colleges and universities. Her budget does nothing to allay our concerns that schools and communities lack the necessary resources for adequately equipping today's students for their roles as future community leaders, informed citizens, and responsible parents who will continue their families' commitment to this beautiful region of Connecticut.

Secondly, with regard to HB 5562, enacting and fully funding this bill would be a significant first step in attempting to resolve *CCJEF v Rell* matters outside the courts. (We refer the Committee to CCJEF's written and oral testimony of March 13, 2006.) Raising the foundation and indexing it to the CPI-U will help all communities. Removing the disequalizing ECS cap, which over the last 11 years has cost Connecticut towns over \$1 billion in ECS aid that should have been allocated them under the formula, has long been promised. The cost of lifting the cap immediately is just \$60 million. Given the overall level of ECS underfunding for all communities, it is also vital to keep the ECS hold harmless provisions intact until a revamped school finance system can be devised and implemented at adequate funding levels.

Third, we reiterate our rejection of SB 434 (also raised in our March 13 testimony). This bill is clearly aimed at sending more aid to the towns that need it most — an admirable goal that is long overdue. However, it merely takes from highest-wealth communities and redistributes their already much-too-small state allocations to the higher-need communities. Redistributing the existing inadequate state “education pie” is totally unacceptable. Pitting school districts against school districts, towns against towns, in this manner is unacceptable. Moreover, it is both an inadequate gesture, in that it will do little to solve the existing underfunding problems, and inequitable, adding still another redistribution twist to a badly misshapen equalization formula that has nearly annually been subjected to legislative tinkering. This strategy would even discourage education spending within higher-wealth communities as they try to avoid the recapture provisions. Finally, this particular proposal will further fuel the current school finance adequacy/equity litigation already underway. Thus it is neither in the best interests of the state nor any of its municipalities, local school boards, or CCJEF.

We conclude this testimony by again asking that Education Committee members use their power to influence their legislative colleagues across the aisles to:

- Dramatically increase appropriations this year in early childhood;
- Reduce the special education excess cost threshold to three times the per pupil expenditure of a regular program student, and fully fund that grant;
- Restore the special education excess cost equity grant, and fully fund it;
- Invest more substantially in the English-language acquisition of new immigrant children and the literacy skills of all children living in homes and neighborhoods where English is not the primary spoken language;
- Increase funding for pupil transportation, and fully fund that grant;
- Increase funding for adult education, and fully fund that grant; and
- Increase funding of interdistrict and host magnet schools and vocational agriculture centers (magnet programs of special importance to rural regions of the state) to allow more opportunities for Eastern Connecticut students and communities to participate.

Thank you for this opportunity to again testify before your Committee. And we thank you Committee members for your leadership in standing up for public education.

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Should you have any questions, please contact Steve Cassano at (860) 478-5535 or Dianne Kaplan deVries at (860) 461-0320.

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 individuals. Member school districts serve more than 200,000 students, including some two-thirds of Connecticut's minority students, those from low-income homes, and students from homes where English is not the primary language. The coalition's growing membership includes towns that are home to 1.3 million residents (approximately 38 percent of the state's population).