

COMMENTS OF THE

**CONNECTICUT COALITION
FOR *JUSTICE*
IN EDUCATION FUNDING**

TO THE

**State Board of Education's
Five-Year Comprehensive Plan**

July 24, 2006

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates this opportunity to submit comments pertinent to the interests of its members concerning the State Board of Education's Five-Year Comprehensive Plan.

Overall, this document is uninspiring and disappointing. Whether the problem resides more with what was so cryptically set to paper or to a pro forma planning process that provided insufficient opportunity to substantively weigh the many critical challenges facing Connecticut's schools today, we cannot say. But this plan contains no "bold ways to improve the quality of public education in Connecticut." Indeed, the sketchy draft appears to stay the present course and could easily bear the date 2000-2005 along with another state's name. More disturbing is its lack of comprehensiveness.

A few examples: The plan contains no concerted strategies that portend to remedy, or to even significantly improve, the unacceptable student outcomes within urban and urban-ring school districts or the racial and economic segregation that persists in Connecticut school districts. There is no concern that a quality curriculum and effective pedagogy must address the extra needs of students at risk of academic failure as well as those who are gifted, be relevant to the everyday lives and aspirations of students from diverse backgrounds, and otherwise motivate all students to want to do their best. There is no indication of the importance of the arts, an understanding of history and our democratic processes, or an appreciation of other cultures; nor is there mention of the role of co-curricular, extra-curricular, service, and community-based learning programs in engaging and motivating students, promoting physical well-being and sportsmanship, and fostering talent, ethical choices, and leadership skills — all of which address the cognitive, social, emotional, and other developmental needs of the whole child. There are no strategies specifically aimed at improving student discipline, providing training in conflict resolution, concertedly preventing school dropout, or reengaging the thousands of adolescents who drop out of middle school and high school each year.

The plan is also unclear about the development and uses of essential administrative and research tools that modern state education agencies require. Will the data warehouse enable the state to capture and store student-level performance and demographic data to permit sophisticated analyses of learning by researchers striving to hold schools accountable and to ferret out especially promising practices? Absent is any mention of needed improvements in school and district accounting practices, such as a statewide chart of accounts, that would contribute to a better understanding of cost-effectiveness of school operations and facilitate an improved targeting of spending to maximize learning.

The Five-Year Plan is more pabulum than a meaningful blueprint for 21st century educational reform in Connecticut. What is even more sad, despite serving the wealthiest state in the nation, the State Board has no financial ability to execute even this mediocre plan thoroughly. Small strides, too diffused by inadequate funding to make any significant progress, are the most we can expect from this plan. Echoes of the past, though the social and economic stakes grow increasingly greater for us all.

Glaringly absent from Goals II and III are any intended actions to combat the state's failure to adequately and equitably fund its public schools and thereby to ensure that all schools are equipped to provide equal educational opportunity. As the state's primary representative to the public schools, charged with overseeing the best interests of schoolchildren, the State Board of Education ought to be a primary advocate for the funding necessary to realize the very goals, objectives, and strategies it sets forth for its students and schools. Yet the plan is silent on this fundamental matter. Surely the State Board has a duty to relentlessly pursue with the Governor, the Legislature, and the general public the urgent need for adequate school funding and a modernization of the state aid formula. Surely also the State Board has a duty to ensure that the underfunded, understaffed Department of Education is substantially strengthened, appropriately staffed with experts, and adequately financed.

We urge that the State Board add to its plan the immediate strengthening and adequate funding of the 1047 schools operated by local and regional boards of education and the Regional Education Service Centers, schools that together serve approximately 555,000 children, or 97 percent of all PK-12 public school students. Also, the State Board's focus must be on fulfilling the state's commitments under the *Sheff* agreement, successfully completing the important reforms currently underway in the Technical High School system, and undertaking needed reforms in Unified School Districts 1 and 2. As for the plan's proposed expansion of magnet schools and Open Choice programs, CCJEF strongly supports same but cautions that funding constraints are currently undermining these important strategies for combating racial and economic isolation.

Only after these primary legal and moral imperatives are met should the Board entertain proposals for any further expansion or increased funding of the independently run charter schools, which today serve a mere 0.5 percent of all public school students (< 3,000) in 14 small schools. Granted that a few of these schools may on the surface appear to be promising and many dissatisfied parents and other critics look to school choice rather than rolling up their sleeves to fight for high-quality schools in every neighborhood. However, for the State Board to continue to invest precious time and energy, political capital, and the state's too-limited fiscal resources in further growing these schools into an alternative public school system is an ill-conceived policy direction tantamount to supporting educational privatization. Abandoning the common schools that have served and helped shape the state of Connecticut and this great nation for the past two centuries is not in anyone's best interests — nor is starving the public schools of the fiscal resources necessary for student success.

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CCJEF's Project Director, Dr. Dianne Kaplan deVries, can be reached at (860) 461-0320 or dianne@ccjef.org. 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 others. Member school districts serve more than 220,000 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 communities that are home to 1.3 million residents, or approximately 38 percent of the state's population.