

TESTIMONY OF THE

CONNECTICUT COALITION
FOR **JUSTICE**
IN EDUCATION FUNDING

TO THE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

February 25, 2015

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee: The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) appreciates this opportunity to submit comments on several of the bills before you today.

SB 942, An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor Concerning Education

Before addressing a few specific sections of this bill, CCJEF wishes to acknowledge the Governor's effort to level-fund the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant. Nevertheless, as we all know, level-funding of the ECS is essentially a cut and will put even more pressure on school districts across our state. Either they will need to slash programs and/or staffing, or their municipalities will need to pick up this additional share of the State's rightful funding responsibility. The Coalition is deeply disappointed with the proposed education budget, particularly in view of the fact that the *CCJEF v. Rell* adequacy and equity lawsuit is moving ahead and expected to go to trial in the Fall.

The Governor's proposed budget raises a number of questions about the intended future of education finance, adequacy, and equity in Connecticut.

Secs. 1-9, 19, 20, 26: The proposal seeks to enshrine in state statute a perpetual proportional reduction in education grants if there are not adequate appropriations. In the past such language was limited to a fiscal year or two to allow the General Assembly to fashion a state budget later in the session based on the most current available revenue and expenditure information. Why this change now?

We also question precisely what is intended by reducing grants "proportionately"? Proportionate reductions are widely recognized as inequitable, given that they have a far greater negative impact on high-need/low-wealth recipients. If what is meant is across-the-

board cuts, wherein each municipality/school district receives the same percentage reduction, that method of grant reduction makes for an inequitable process, inasmuch as it fails to take into consideration the local need and fiscal health of grantees or the scope of the cut's potential impact on schoolchildren. For example, a 10% cut to ECS in Wilton, which receives a mere \$1.56 million per year in ECS funding, will make little difference in a community that is already shouldering nearly all costs of schooling from its strong property tax base, whereas a 10% cut to Bridgeport would amount to some \$17.9 million and create a maelstrom as local officials desperately try to close that budget gap.

Indeed, economists note that proportionate across-the-board cuts widen the gap between resource-rich and resource-poor communities, undoing years of fiscal equalization. This gap is exacerbated when major state funding formulae such as the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant are adulterated and modified over the years and consistently underfunded and ignored.

Secs. 10-13, Youth Service Bureaus: We question why the responsibility for establishing, maintaining, or expanding youth service bureaus, overseeing their operations, and even providing cost-sharing grants to assist municipalities and private youth-serving organizations should be transferred out of the Department of Education and into the Department of Children and Families?

DCF is one of the State's most distressed departments; it already has monumental and extremely urgent challenges, along with too-limited budget and staffing to adequately deal with same. Not only does SB 942 transfer youth service bureaus to DCF, but also the budgeted amount for the program was cut from \$3.6 million in FY14 and FY15 to just \$2.3 million for the coming biennium. Given the important role this program serves and the ever-increasing need, what is the rationale for the departmental transfer and the budget cut of more than one-third?

Sec. 20, Commissioner's Network: The Governor is proposing to slash funding for the commissioner's network from \$17.5 million in FY15 to \$12.8 in the new biennium. How, then, are the programmatic increases proposed in this bill to be funded? Instead of a total of 25 schools, SB 942 would increase that to 25 schools in any single school year, which would necessitate a serious scaling back of State resources to support schools' turnaround efforts. What level of funding per school, both for schools already in the network and new ones to be added, should districts now expect? Equally perplexing is the proposal (lines 433-37) to allow the commissioner to select up to 8 schools in a single school district. Such a large number of network schools would be unduly disruptive of school district operations, overshadowing all other local improvement efforts in other non-network schools, draining away critical amounts of time, effort, and energy needed for the successful management of districtwide operations by the superintendent, central office specialists, and the board of education. Aside from not having sufficient state funding or CSDE staffing to pull this off successfully, for all practical purposes, 8 network schools at a given time would constitute almost a state takeover of the district.

Secs. 18-19, 24-25, Priority School Districts: We question what impacts the proposed formula and eligible use changes to the Priority School district grant will have, particularly in light of the \$6.4 million funding cut proposed for FY16?

SB 943, An Act Concerning Charter School Modernization and Reform

This bill requires much additional work, if it's truly to bring about "modernization and reform" of Connecticut's charter schools. For the sake of brevity, we'll only here address a few of the most salient issues we have with this bill.

The bill does not go far enough in meaningfully strengthening transparency. It should be made clear that every pertinent detail of charter school operations — including their CSDE charter applications, contracts with charter management organizations (CMOs), and the full gamut of student, staffing, and fiscal information required of traditional public schools — must be made public, posted to both their individual school websites and to that of CSDE.

There is no legitimate public policy reason why the same level of detail about operations required of traditional neighborhood schools and districts (in which over 93% of our public school students are educated) is not readily available to the general public about charter schools.

It is also time for an impartial, outside professional evaluation of Connecticut's charter schools. Such a study is needed given that over this past decade alone, taxpayers have invested more than \$465 million in these schools (as per CSDE's Historic Grants Payments webpage, expenditures 2005-14). This study, for example, should not only look at the effectiveness of such schools, operational and fiscal issues (including CMO management fees), but also the extent to which charter schools promote racial and economic integration, as well as include English-language learners and special education pupils in their student populations.

SB 944, An Act Establishing a Full-Day Kindergarten Requirement

This bill finally moves the state toward universal full-day kindergarten, but it does so without adequate funding. Despite the educational good it will bring young children throughout the state, it increases the already heavy fiscal burden on local school districts and exacerbates the over-reliance on property taxes to fund public education.

HB 6835, An Act Concerning English Language Learners

This bill suggests some welcome improvements for ELL students, most especially in terms of extending bilingual education program eligibility to 60 months.

A few questions: Sec. 1, line 12 would mandate bilingual education if 6 students in any school shared a dominant non-English language. Why 6? What comparable provisions can be made for even 1 non-English-speaking child? Sec. 1 (d) seems unclear (if not altogether unfair) for any newly arrived ELL who's attained 10th grade status.

Finally, Sec. 4 suggests that RESCs may be cost-effective in providing ESL, sheltered English and English immersion programs, or other such research-based language development programs. This may be true, but concern over the social and emotional well-being of the children themselves, their smooth integration into the life of their new neighborhoods, and helping them to build positive connections with their English-speaking peers should also be a priority.

SB 965, An Act Concerning Education Issues

This proposal is a place-holder without any specific charge.

CCJEF proposes that the Department of Education be required to jointly commission (with CCJEF) a new adequacy and equity cost study, updating the 2005 one that was conducted by Augenblick, Palaich & Associates (Denver) prior to the filing of the CCJEF lawsuit. (Under Governor Rell, CSDE provided data for the 2005 study and senior officials served on the review panel.)

Adequacy cost studies provide policymakers with a rational basis on which to make funding decisions by generating the best estimates that current social science tools offer for understanding what it actually costs for school districts to meet the diverse learning needs of their students and the performance expectations of parents, employers, and the State. Adequacy studies provide a reasoned, research-based foundation for school funding systems and are less susceptible to state budget politics than funding formulas that are designed primarily to reflect what it is that the state wishes to allocate to PK-12 education.

Courts across the nation have relied on adequacy cost studies to help determine the sufficiency of state funding levels and compliance with state constitutional provisions pertaining to children's fundamental right to equal opportunity.

Based on today's state and federal standards and enrollment patterns in Connecticut's schools, a new adequacy study would estimate (a) what it costs to adequately educate students who have no extra learning needs (i.e., the foundation level), and (b) the extra (marginal) costs of educating poor, ELL, and special education students (at varying levels of disability). Costs would be adjusted for district size, geographical cost differences, and high concentration of at-risk students and other factors beyond the control of the schools but which impact the delivery (and thus cost) of quality education. Costs could also be adjusted for grade spans (e.g., preschool, middle grades, high school).

Should the Education Committee be interested in further detail, CCJEF would be pleased to provide additional information about the 2005 study and how a 2015 study might look.

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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, other pro-education advocacy organizations, parents and Connecticut schoolchildren aged 18 or older, and other concerned Connecticut taxpayers. Member school communities are home to more than half of all public school students, including some three-fourths of all minority students, those from low-income families, and students from homes where English is not the primary language.

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