

Testimony of John M. Fabrizi
Mayor, City of Bridgeport
In Support of SB 1114, "An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget
Recommendations Regarding Education"
Before the Joint Committee on Education
February 20, 2007

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee, my name is John Fabrizi and I am mayor to the great city of Bridgeport. I am here today to testify in support of the Governor's comprehensive proposal to improve resources granted to cities and towns across Connecticut for education, based on the recommendations of the Commission on Education Finance that many of you participated on.

Let me say from the outset that I appreciate the tireless efforts that those of you assembled today have made to ensure that the children of Connecticut have access to a quality education. You have managed to do so on a bi-partisan basis and in the face of seemingly insurmountable unfunded federal hurdles. As mayor to one of the state's largest cities and as an educator for over 25 years, I am here to say to you that the comprehensive proposal embodied in Senate Bill 1114 represents one of the most promising initiatives that we've seen in decades.

We in the City of Bridgeport are very fortunate to have engaged and devoted parents to the youngsters in our schools, many of whom have joined the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition. In addition to our committed parents, we also have been supported by true partners in the Bridgeport business community, under the leadership of Paul Timpanelli. As your Commission met, the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition convened citywide meetings and identified priorities for education reform. I am pleased to see that many of those priorities have made their way into the bill before you today, specifically:

1.) Increasing the foundation for Education Cost Sharing (E.C.S.) calculation from \$5,891 to \$9,867;

The foundation, which is the per-pupil amount on which the ECS calculation is based, has not kept pace with escalating costs or inflation. Raising the foundation level will go a long way to support the State in meeting its financial obligation to education funding.

2.) Using the number of students who qualify for free and reduced price meals as one of the measures of poverty because it more accurately reflects the students in schools with a 25% weighting factor;

The City of Bridgeport serves more students than any other city or town in Connecticut, in excess of 24, 000 students with an increasingly diverse population of students who are poor, with limited-English proficiency, and special needs or at risk for academic failure. . We have 67 languages spoken in our schools, more than one out of three students has NO preschool experience, nearly all students are economically disadvantaged (95% of our student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch) and nearly one out of ten students drop out each year.

3.) Improving the special education cost reimbursement formula from 4.5 to 3.5 times the cost of regular education, per student;

Special Education costs have been increasing faster than overall school budgets. In FY 04-05, Bridgeport spent over \$40 million per year, or 24% of our school budget on special education, which is certainly far from adequate to meet the extra learning needs of the students. Reducing the reimbursement threshold for the Special Education excess cost grant to four or three times the per pupil expenditure of a regular program student and fully funding that grant would substantially benefit not only Bridgeport but all other school districts.

4.) Increasing the weighting for English Language Learners from its current level of 10%.

The combined effect of these changes could result in an increase in educational funding for the Bridgeport schools of over \$85 million over 4 years. Rightly so, increased accountability for host school systems will go hand-in-hand with the expanded resources that they could stand to gain.

I recognize that the Governor's budget proposal and today's hearing represent the start of a very arduous process for your committee and members of the General Assembly. It is my sincerest hope that urban and suburban leaders, legislators, the governor and community and business advocacy groups can work together to craft an education cost sharing package that erodes the separate and unequal foundation at the heart of the Connecticut public educational system. On behalf of the students, parents, community and business leaders of Bridgeport, I offer our active support and heartfelt thanks for your thoughtful consideration of our needs.