

TESTIMONY FROM MAYOR ART WARD, CITY OF BRISTOL

To The

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

March 9, 2009

Governor's Bill 830 "An Act Concerning the Governor's Recommendations Regarding Education"

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and Members of the Education Committee. My name is Art Ward and I am the Mayor for the City of Bristol.

Thank you for providing a public hearing on this bill which would implement certain portions of the Governor's proposed biennial budget by, among other things, level funding the Education Cost Sharing grant, postponing the effective date for the in-school suspension mandate, and capping education grants at the level of appropriation.

EDUCATION COST SHARING

The City of Bristol applauds the Governor's willingness to put forward a bold proposal to flat-fund major education grants, especially during one of the toughest fiscal times experienced by our state.

The City of Bristol has already been forced to implement non-filling of vacated positions within all of our city departments, including Police; curtailment of all but essential overtime throughout all departments, resulting in the limiting/elimination of many betterment and public awareness programs; restriction of conference/seminar attendance to only those programs resulting in professional accreditation/certification; cutbacks on all but absolute necessary program supplies; restriction of all municipal travel; and discussions regarding potential for future furlough/lay-offs or potential position elimination.

The Governor's proposal to flat-fund major education grants comes at critical time for the state and municipalities. It is important to fully understand that the cost of local public education is by far the largest one in municipal budgets – about 70% of those budgets, statewide. While tough decisions are being made regarding the state budget, any reductions in ECS and other education grants would be devastating to towns and cities - resulting in additional layoffs and cuts in education programs. The ripple effect would also mean increased property taxes. While flat-funding of major education grants won't even keep up with inflation, Governor Rell's leadership in supporting education funding and reducing unfunded mandates is critically needed to maintain the quality of local public education and help reduce property tax pressures throughout Connecticut.

CCM's recently published Public Policy Report: *K-12 Public Education: The State Of The State And Local Partnership* provides a full discussion of education funding in Connecticut. This report, which was provided to all legislators when published and has been attached to CCM's testimony today, seeks to foster a better comprehension of the importance of the state-local partnership in funding education. It is critical

that the State meet its funding obligations to Connecticut's schoolchildren and school districts even in the face of budget challenges.

IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

This bill would also delay implementation of Public Act 07-66, *which requires schools to do in-school suspensions* unless a student poses a threat or danger to other students or faculty. As reported by municipalities, through CCM, the costs associated with this mandate for staffing, administrative and facilities would deplete already limited education funding.

A delay in the implementation date will provide municipalities an immediate savings on costs associated with housing such students on-site during their suspension periods and allow municipalities more time to implement a long-term plan for meeting the intent of the law.

CCM has estimated that implementing the mandate would cost towns and cities from \$9,000 per year (small town) to \$4.5 million per year (city). The average cost per student is approximately \$197.

This mandate should not just be delayed, it should be repealed unless full state funding is provided for it. At the very least, the Committee should clarify that the purpose of the postponement is to secure state funding to reimburse towns and cities for costs associated with the mandate.

CAPPING GRANTS AT THE LEVEL OF APPROPRIATIONS

Lastly, this bill would cap reimbursement to municipalities – of key education funding streams - at the level of appropriations. While the State is certainly facing hard decisions, as are municipalities, however it is very important to understand that capping reimbursements for key grants such as Special Education will inevitably shift costs to local governments.

It is important that the State adequately appropriate the needed levels of funding to support and sustain education in Connecticut and not make these grants victims of the current budget problems.