

## Testimony on Raised Bill No. 1195

Wendy Lecker

March 24, 2011

Chairpersons Harp and Walker, and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Wendy Lecker and I respectfully oppose Raised Bill 1195, An Act Concerning School Finance Reform. I am co-president of Stamford's Parent Teacher Council, the umbrella organization for Stamford's 20 pto's and I am the parent of three public school students in Stamford. I am also a former staff attorney with the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, which brought a successful school funding lawsuit against New York State, and I have researched state school funding formulas as a consultant for the Rural Schools and Community Trust.

I cannot appear to testify in person, because this evening I must testify at Stamford's Joint Board of Representatives-Board of Finance Public Hearing on our local school budget. Since Stamford's schools are facing the possibility of millions of dollars in cuts in essential staff and services, I, along with many Stamford parents and taxpayers, must remain in Stamford to try to preserve these vital services in our schools.

### Money follows the Child has Already Been Found to be Inequitable

Raised Bill No. 1195 seeks to codify a funding concept known as "money follows the child," where local school districts will be required to pay for children who leave their district to attend charter schools. Last year, "money follows the child" was proposed and rejected numerous times. It was first put to the State Board of Education. Prior to a meeting regarding this proposal, the State Department of Education conducted an analysis of the proposal. (A copy each of SDE's presentation and supporting documents are attached). The State Department of Education found that were this money follows the child proposal been accepted, it would have had a devastating effect on most school districts. Stamford would have been among the hardest hit. Had "money follows the child" been enacted, Stamford, a district of approximately 15,000 students, would have immediately lost 51% of its ECS funding just to pay for a little over 200 students that attend charter schools. Just a small increase in charter schools students would have stripped Stamford of all of its ECS funding and millions more.

Over 40% of Stamford's public school students are eligible for free and reduced price lunch; 37% come from homes where English is not the home language, almost 15% of our children are not fluent in English and almost 10% of our children require special education services. Despite this need, Stamford receives about \$500 per child as its ECS allocation- one tenth the median allocation of other districts in our District Reference Group, DRG H. Depriving our needy children of funds, when we already receive so little, is manifestly unjust.

Connecticut charter schools already spend more per student than their traditional public school counterparts. (See page 8 of SDE Charter School Supporting Documents, attached) In Stamford, the two charter schools each spend about \$8,000 more per child than Stamford's public schools spend per child. (See page 8 of SDE Charter School Supporting Documents, attached)

The State Board of Education, after learning the facts, rejected "money follows the child." Nonetheless, this proposal found its way to the Education Committee of the Legislature, in the form of Raised Bill 5493. The Education Committee rejected this bill as well.

"Money follows the child" was raised again this year, in a proposal by an Ad Hoc Committee of the State Board of Education. After hearing public testimony against this proposal, including testimony from five representatives from Stamford, the president of New Britain's Board of Education, the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding and CEA, the State Board of Education tabled the proposals from the Ad Hoc Committee.

Over ninety percent of public school students in Connecticut attend traditional districted public schools. "Money follows the child" has been shown numerous times to deprive these districts of money in order to fund the very small percentage of children that attend charter schools. School funding policy should not be made to satisfy the few at the expense of the vast majority of public school students.

#### Successful School Funding Reform in the U.S.

Through my work, I am familiar with school funding reform efforts across the country. Whether states engage in funding reform as a result of a court order or whether done independently by the legislature, they start with an analysis of the cost of education performed by a nationally recognized expert.

In **Maryland**, school funding reform started with the experts. The bi-partisan Thornton Commission studied Maryland's funding formula, compared it with funding formulas nationwide and held public hearings. It then commissioned a cost study by a nationally recognized firm and also accepted the results of another cost study commissioned by an advocacy group. Relying on these cost studies, the Commission issued recommendations for a reformed school funding system, truncating a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of its school funding system.

In **Pennsylvania**, the legislature commissioned a nationally known firm to conduct a cost study connecting resources needed with the state's learning standards; and relying on the cost study, it refashioned its funding formula.

In **Wyoming**, the state hired consultants to gather information from educators across the state to identify the basic building blocks of an adequate education and, then to cost out those components.

The same basic process took place in **New York, Massachusetts, Kansas, New Mexico.** These and many other states reformed their school funding systems using design principles developed with the guidance of experts who researched the cost of delivering quality education in their states. They looked to educators to develop the components of an adequate education, then employed nationally recognized school finance experts to assess the cost of those components, adjusting the cost to account for student needs, community wealth and geographic variables that impact the cost of education.

#### The Current Bill lacks any Education Finance Analysis.

None of the steps described above took place with Raised Bill 1195. To my knowledge, there was no consultation with any national expert about Connecticut school finance or school finance practices in other states. In fact the State Department of Education was not even asked to conduct an analysis of the impact of this bill. This bill was released just late last week. Thus, SDE, were it asked to do an analysis, would only have one week to study this lengthy and complex bill that seeks to completely overhaul our school finance system. It would be virtually impossible for SDE to conduct a responsible analysis, complete with running simulations, in one week.

#### There has been No Public Input in Drafting this Bill

As described above, serious statewide efforts to reform school finance across the United States always involve representatives from communities and stakeholders across the state. Here, no public meetings were held to explain the background of this bill. No input was gathered regarding the components of a quality education. There were no efforts made to communicate the upheaval this bill might create. This bill is being heard in a public hearing at a time when Stamford and other municipalities are deeply involved in passing their local school budgets. Municipalities like ours cannot focus on the intricacies of this bill at this time, although the effects of this bill may truly be devastating to us. The only organizations that seemed to have any advance notice of this bill were charter school lobby organizations. And it is likely that you will only hear from those representatives at the public hearing, despite the fact that they represent only a tiny percentage of public school students.

#### This Bill Ignores Current School Funding Reform Efforts in Connecticut

Stamford is an active member of the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding ("CCJEF"), which has sued the state to reform its school funding laws. As you know, a year ago, the Connecticut Supreme Court issued a historic decision allowing this lawsuit to proceed to trial. Governor Malloy has stated publicly his sincere interest in effecting school funding reform. There is a distinct possibility that the CCJEF case will be resolved without years of litigation. No school funding bill should be drafted until both sides have a serious attempt at resolving this lawsuit.

Moreover, Governor Malloy recently announced a commission to study the ECS formula in Connecticut. The legislature should not undermine the Governor's efforts by passing legislation prior to, and possibly at odds with, the work of that commission.

### The Need for Meaningful School Funding Reform

My opposition to this bill should not be interpreted as opposition to immediate and serious efforts to reform our school finance efforts. As noted above, Stamford can be seen as the "poster child" for inadequate and inequitable school funding in this State. Despite the proclamations that we should have a 50% state share of education funding in Connecticut, Stamford receives at most about 7% of its education funding from state sources. Local sources account for 88% of our school funding. This disproportionate share imposes an insupportable burden on our local finances, and every year funding for our schools must be pitted against all other essential city services.

Over the past two years, our schools have seen significant cuts. The past two years have seen approximately 60 positions lost. This year's cuts so far include the loss of one assistant principal in every middle school, 12 special education teachers and two social workers. If the City makes any further cuts to our proposed budget, as it has indicated it may do, we will lose even more vital positions.

Over these same few years, our school district has been working tirelessly to increase equity and improve education for all students. For example, we are currently working to detrack our middle schools, as the ability grouping system has been found to deprive too many of our children, especially our children of color, of access to high level courses and the educational opportunity those courses bring. However, every year, our progress toward equity is threatened by the loss of resources. Steady improvement cannot occur in an unstable environment, where from one year to the next, we do not know if we can maintain the same level of services. Our school district needs adequate and predictable funding.

### Formula Funding has been a Basis of Adequacy and Equity in Many States

There have been public statements made by different groups that "money follows the child" is the best or only way to have state funding reflect student need. That is patently false.

Like many other states, the ECS formula provides a foundation amount, which it adjusts for student need and town wealth. But the basic and obvious problems are that the foundation is not connected to the real cost of education, the student need adjustments are not connected to the real cost of adequately serving those students and do not even include students with disabilities, and the measure of town wealth is skewed. Concluding that Connecticut's ECS formula is inequitable and inadequate is not the same as concluding that all foundation-based formulas must be rejected, however.

Across this nation, foundation formulas have been used to bring equity and adequacy to public education. Foundation-based formulas, when based on the true cost of education as determined by education adequacy cost studies, accurately reflect the differing needs of students, be they English Language Learners, children living in poverty or students with disabilities. Moreover, formulas can be adjusted to reflect the concentration of need in various locations and the geographic cost of education. (For background on how foundation formulas are reformed through the use of adequacy cost studies, see [http://www.schoolfunding.info/resource\\_center/costingoutprimer.php3](http://www.schoolfunding.info/resource_center/costingoutprimer.php3) )

Furthermore, foundation-based formulas allow communities to maintain the viability of their school districts. Stamford's public school system is not only a vital educational institution, but an important feature of our local democracy. In Stamford, we have worked very hard to turn 20 disparate schools into one cohesive school district, where every child in every school learns the same high level curriculum, with the same quality of teaching. We are committed to equity in education. This commitment involves at times asking some very painful questions. Whether it is redistricting or detracking, we address these issues publicly. Parents and other members of the community speak out at public hearings, often emotionally. Because we go through the process of improving our schools as one community, the entire community can own our successes. Building capacity in our school district to provide a quality education to all children builds community cohesion. For many, it is through the public school system that they feel they are part of this city as a whole.

### The Current Bill

By contrast, the "money follows the child" idea embodied by this legislation is not grounded in any sound educational financial theories or evidence. (See the attached critique of Professor Bruce Baker, a school finance expert at Rutgers University). There is absolutely no evidence that this scheme can increase equity or adequacy. In fact, by draining school districts of resources, "money follows the child" by design will undermine the capacity of school districts to serve all children. This "money follows the child" scheme is an attempt to use not only state, but also local taxpayer dollars to fund schools that do not serve all children, that often increase segregation and that already spend more per pupil on average than their district counterparts. Unlike charter schools, which are under no obligation to serve all children or all grades, traditional public schools serve any child that comes through their doors and must meet every individual child's needs.

ConnCAN's literature pushing the current legislation declares that this bill is sound because it is modeled after Rhode Island's yet-to-be-implemented school funding formula. With the breadth of school funding reform accomplished since 1989, Rhode Island is a curious choice to guide Connecticut. Rhode Island is the newest and most untested formula- it has not yet been implemented - and its formula actually reduced adequacy for school districts; the formula provides a lower foundation amount than districts received previously. This outcome is exactly the opposite of what we are seeking in Connecticut. So why choose Rhode Island? I would guess that it is because

Rhode Island's formula facilitates charter school funding. However, 92% of our public school students do not attend charter schools. Sound educational finance policy works to benefit all children in all public schools, not a select few.

A major problem with our ECS formula is that it does not accord adequate weight to children living in poverty, English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities. This legislation reverses what little progress we have made in this arena. It does not raise the weight for poverty, because it is not based on any assessment of the cost of educating children living in poverty. Astoundingly, the legislation does not even mention English Language Learners. Educational cost studies across this nation have found that it can cost up to twice as much to educate an English Language Learner as it does to educate a child with no additional needs. Yet this bill does not even accord a weight for our many English Language Learners. Similarly, there is no weight accorded children with disabilities. Educational cost studies have found that it can cost up to four times as much to educate a child with disabilities as it does to educate a child with no additional needs. This complete disregard of the needs of a multitude of children demonstrates that there must have been virtually no study of school finance prior to drafting this bill. How can we adequately serve every child's need if so many are ignored in the funding system proposed by this legislation?

Stamford is indeed seeking school finance reform as soon as possible. However, we seek true school finance reform that is grounded in evidence and sound education finance theory; and reform that will help all of Connecticut's public school students. Raised Bill No. 1195 cannot meet any of these criteria. Therefore, I respectfully urge you to reject this bill.

Respectfully submitted,

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