

TESTIMONY OF THE
CONNECTICUT COALITION
FOR **JUSTICE**
IN EDUCATION FUNDING
TO THE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

February 23, 2011

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates this opportunity to submit comments on Governor's Bill No. 6385 — An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor's Concerning Education.

Before addressing a few specific sections of this bill, CCJEF wishes to formally express to the Education Committee its sincere appreciation and strong support for Governor Malloy's proposed level funding of the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant for the coming biennium. At this most difficult time, when virtually all other budget items are on the table and governors in other states are cutting education, our new Governor has proposed to fill the \$270 million gap in education funding that was left by the expiring ARRA funds. Moreover, that gap will not be filled on the backs of local property taxpayers, inasmuch as there are no gimmicks here that essentially transfer those costs to municipalities.

CCJEF similarly salutes Governor Malloy for forthrightly acknowledging that the ECS formula is broken and outdated. We applaud the bold steps outlined in Sec. 14 of this bill as an early attempt to update the equalization aid grant formula and reform other aspects of state funding of education.

In sum, the Governor's proposed level funding of the ECS, together with his call to finally fix the equalization aid grant and related funding streams, is one of the more courageous steps toward sustaining and improving Connecticut's public schools over the past 30 years since the ECS was first introduced.

While the Governor's proposed education budget appears to set the state on a path toward education adequacy and equity, we must not lose sight of the fact that level funding of education is still a cut, as state funding will fail to keep pace with rising education costs. Most school districts have already made significant staff and program cuts over the past three years, and the additional imminent painful cuts for FY12 and again for FY13 will further erode student learning.

Take New Britain for example: Facing an \$11 million gap just to maintain the current level of services, the Board of Education has already enacted drastic steps: reducing the Superintendent's proposed budget by \$5.9 million, eliminating 105 positions (80 of which are instructional), and putting in jeopardy its all-day kindergarten program, dropout prevention

program, and computer lab paraprofessionals. If the Governor is not able to close the ARRA gap in ECS funding, another 144 positions will need to be cut, most of them held by teachers. How many additional layoffs will be necessary once the Board of Education budget reaches City Hall is not yet known.

Compounding the severe fiscal stress on school districts are the proposed funding levels and caps for the Special Education Excess Cost, Pupil Transportation, Priority School District, and Adult Education grants. The concept of “shared sacrifice” within the Governor’s proposed education budget for these categorical grants is especially problematic. This shared sacrifice will have a disproportionate impact on districts that serve the costliest SPED students with exceptional needs, as well as for urban and smaller districts that serve a majority of the state’s low-income students and English-language learners.

CCJEF beseeches members of the Education Committee and their General Assembly colleagues to make every effort to uncap the SPED Excess Cost and Transportation grants, and to provide additional relief for the academically and fiscally distressed Priority School Districts. Many of these municipalities stand to incur substantial state aid cuts due to the potential loss of their PILOT manufacturing grants, losses that may ripple down to a decrease in local aid for their schools. (For an example of the vital role that Priority School District grants play within high-needs districts, see the testimony filed today by parent/attorney Wendy Lecker of Stamford.)

Finally, despite the Governor’s noteworthy efforts to preserve education funding, his proposed budget means that the state’s share of school operating costs will continue its downward slide — putting the long-promised 50/50 state-local cost-sharing goal even farther out of reach.

A few specific comments on the sections of Governor’s Bill No. 6385 most directly relevant to CCJEF’s goal to reform education funding to ensure equal educational opportunity for all schoolchildren:

- **Section 14 — CCJEF proposes that the task force outlined in the Governor’s bill be modified to reflect a multi-year/multi-step process for designing, piloting, and phasing-in (as the state’s economy recovers) a comprehensive, multi-tiered formula that would adequately and equitably fund all traditional public school districts, regional districts, interdistrict and host magnet schools, Open Choice, regional vo-ag programs, charter and CommPACT schools, and the proposed regional vocational-technical high schools.** The process might look like this:
 - Year 1, as appropriate to the task force membership designated in this section, would establish the primary formula — i.e., the foundation and weights needed to adequately and equitably fund the state’s traditional local school districts that serve more than 90 percent of all public school students.
 - In Year 2, the task force, with appropriate membership by representatives of “choice” schools and programs, would build upon the revised ECS formula to incorporate suitable weights for each of those public school options.

- In Year 3, the task force would devise appropriate accountability mechanisms (consistent with the General Assembly's Results Based Accountability processes) and establish long-term technical monitoring to maximize the return on investment of federal, state, and local education dollars.
- Years 3 to 5 would also see the piloting of the revised ECS formula, followed by any necessary tweaking. In Year 6, statewide phasing-in of the new formula would begin at a pace commensurate with the state's progress toward economy recovery.

The end product of the task force process would be a basic formula applicable to all types of public school enrollments, with weights that reflect the varying operating costs of each — a comprehensive research-based formula constructed to maximize equity, support quality teaching and learning in all educational settings, and hopefully end the “funding wars” between traditional public school districts and schools of “choice.” The end goal would be equal educational opportunity and enhanced learning for all public schoolchildren.

Additional comments pertaining to Section 14:

- (3)(E)(F)(G) should refer to “chief administrative officer” rather than chief elected official, inasmuch as that better reflects the manner in which many towns and cities are governed.
- (3), in general, should stipulate that all appointed task force representatives have a solid understanding of the current ECS grant formula and related funding streams. If the proposed comprehensive multi-year process described above is adopted, in Year 2 additional members representing “choice” programs would need to be added.
- Provision should be made to require the sustained technical assistance of nonpartisan, nationally prominent education finance experts to advise the task force, ensure that “best practices” from around the nation and state-of-the-art school finance design principles are considered, and assist the Office of Policy and Management and State Department of Education in this high-stakes and highly complex undertaking. We all want the end product to be a vast improvement over the current system, and we all want it to be able to pass constitutional muster when fully implemented.
- **Section 15 — CCJEF appreciates the Governor's proposed adherence to the minimum budget requirement of FY09.** Lowering the MBR, or eliminating it altogether, as some draft bills have suggested, would result in a lowering of local aid for education in many municipalities. However, in cases of demonstrated efficiencies or other significant cost savings achieved by local boards of education, CCJEF suggests that in fairness to constrained municipal budgets, special year-by-year accommodations be granted on a case-by-case basis for those municipalities who regularly maintain, for example, at least a 40 percent margin of compliance above their MBR, with the reduction to be agreed upon jointly by the Commissioner of Education and Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management.

- **Section 16 — CCJEF strongly supports the Governor’s expressed intent to transfer the operations of regional vocational-technical high schools to local or regional boards of education or, should they decline, to their respective RESCs.** Adequate levels of state aid for these valuable schools, however, can be expected to exceed the contribution required for all other magnet schools or programs, even after accounting for an infusion of local tax dollars upon their transfer and increased private sector support. In order to reach globally competitive status, these vocational-technical high schools will likely be the state’s most expensive public schools to operate, given their unique staffing, technology, machinery, and other costly requirements related to their curricular specialties. While it would be erroneous to consider the proposed transfer of operational control as an immediate cost savings for the state, this action should result in future savings as the schools begin to fulfill their mission to prepare the state’s future workforce while expanding opportunities for thousands of more students to experience their programs each year.

CCJEF members fully appreciate that the education budget is but one of many other unprecedented aspects of the Governor’s courageous biennium budget that this committee and all other members of the General Assembly must evaluate. As you weigh the proposed education budget, however, please keep in mind that **there is no better economic stimulus, both short- and long-term, than investing in public education.** Today’s children are tomorrow’s workforce, taxpayers, parents, and civic leaders. Even the “perfect” school finance formula cannot work unless it is adequately funded — and that means we must increase state revenues in order to realize meaningful educational improvements and narrow the appalling achievement gap.

CCJEF stands with Governor Malloy in support of a state revenue plan with a greater commitment to progressive tax measures and reduced property tax burden. Without these reforms, Connecticut will not be able to support a 21st-century school finance system that distributes adequate funding for all schoolchildren, their schools, and their communities in an equitable way. We commend the Governor for his courage and urge him to take the next steps on the path to the world-class education system our students and taxpayers deserve.

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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, and 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 45 percent of 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.