

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

March 7, 2011

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates this opportunity to submit comments on the below raised bills:

SB 1103 — An Act Concerning Early Childhood Education

- **Sec. 1:** CCJEF recognizes the value and importance of high-quality school readiness programs for all Connecticut schoolchildren, and considers such programs as essential to educational adequacy and equity. Nevertheless, given the state's current underfunding of public education, CCJEF must reluctantly oppose the mandating of such programs, inasmuch as they would dramatically increase the educational funding burden on local school districts and their municipalities. In other words, requiring all public schools to maintain readiness programs would become still another costly unfunded mandate. (Please see today's written testimony of CCM concerning this bill, as it provides ample rationale for why this additional unfunded mandate is unreasonable at this time.) However, as school finance reform efforts move forward and the state's economy rebounds, CCJEF hopes that school readiness programs will indeed become an integral part of a revamped PK-12 education finance system.
- **Sec. 3 (lines 107-14):** CCJEF commends the proposed longitudinal evaluation of the school readiness program that would examine the educational progress of children from PK-grade 4. Aside from its obvious important uses for improving vital early childhood services and aligning curricula in the early grades to better meet the learning needs of incoming schoolchildren, such a study should also provide findings useful to school finance reform efforts.

HB 6498 — An Act Concerning School Districts

- **Sec. 1:** CCJEF does not support extending the deadline for expansion of the statewide public school information system beyond 2013. This data information system should have been in place years ago. A complete and fully operational system is now extremely urgent, in that the data contained therein will be essential in the close monitoring of an improved school finance system that aims to ensure education equity and adequacy for all schoolchildren and their schools.

- **Sec. 4-6:** Since charters were first authorized in Connecticut in 1997 through last year (FY10), the state has invested over \$306.6 million in charter schools. They have received another \$31.7 million from federal sources. These are all taxpayer dollars that otherwise would have gone almost exclusively to urban school districts. And, of course, those same urban districts have been deprived of some of their highest-potential students and most activist parents due to the existence of these privately operated, independent schools. Before enabling further expansion of charter enrollments and committing increasing levels of state funding thereto, CCJEF urges that the Education Committee include in this final bill a provision to require the State Department of Education to commission a comprehensive programmatic and fiscal evaluation of charter schools. Without such a detailed examination by an outside non-charter affiliated research organization, school finance reforms aimed at incorporating choice programs like charters into a formula that resembles the ECS cannot be justified, as far too little of their operations, cost structures, or sustained learning outcomes of their students is known.
- **Sec. 9-16:** CCJEF supports the extension of these high school reform deadlines, in light of the severe fiscal constraints on both state and local budgets.

HB 6500 — An Act Concerning Educational Achievement

- **Sec. 3:** CCJEF strongly supports an updated and uniform system of accounting for school revenues and expenditures, one that includes mandatory use of a school-level chart of accounts by local and regional boards of education, regional educational service centers, the regional vocational-technical high school system, and all charter schools. The aim of such accounting improvements should be to provide better information for policymakers but also to enhance budget transparency for the public.

Special care should be taken to align the improved accounting procedures with best practices nationally that have been underway for the past decade or so. Some consideration should also be given to drilling down to the program level — perhaps as a pilot within a voluntary cross-section of a dozen or so school districts — with an eye to more finely capturing data for cost-effectiveness research and aiding other such studies that can help maximize student learning and stretch precious education dollars. For example, program-level data would facilitate an examination of the payback on certain prevention versus remediation strategies, and help ascertain which instructional approaches (e.g., reading or math programs) or intervention programs (e.g., dropout or pregnancy prevention) work best in which circumstances and at what investment level.

Nevertheless, such accounting system improvements invite misinterpretation, flawed apples-to-oranges comparisons that fuel partisan purposes, and other data misuses. Such is to be expected as an unfortunate outcome of improved budget transparency. Another unfortunate implication of proposed accounting system improvements will be the additional workload required of already thinly staffed school budget offices, and in that regard, this would be still another unfunded mandate.

HB 6502 — An Act Concerning the Open Choice Program

- **Sec. 3(3)(h) (lines 293-98):** CCJEF generally supports this raised bill in its attempts to enhance the state's ability to meet its commitments under the 2008 Sheff stipulated agreement. However, we strongly oppose this particular provision, which would reduce sending district's ADM and resident student counts for each Open Choice student by half and increase those counts for receiving districts by an equal amount.

Bolstering the Open Choice grants for receiving districts, as proposed in Sec. 3(2), is a positive step forward. But to also propose a reduction in student counts for sending districts as of July 1, 2011, thereby specifically targeting DRG I school districts that are heavily reliant on the ECS and most academically and fiscally fragile, is grossly unfair.

In Hartford, where 1300 students currently attend other districts, this would mean the sudden loss of some \$5.1 million in ECS aid; that Open Choice deduction would be in addition to the \$6.9 million the district already loses due to the 0.25 magnet school reduction. The FY12 district budgets of Bridgeport, New Haven, and New London would also be negatively impacted. These are substantial sudden losses in state aid that these fiscally distressed districts and their equally fiscally distressed municipalities cannot and should not be expected to bear. To assume that such cuts would not impede current instructional improvement efforts underway within all four districts is naïve.

Unless and until all Connecticut schools are adequately and equitably funded, any provision that reduces the current level of ECS funding should not even be considered — least of all in a way that would essentially punish urban districts for the de facto racial and economic segregation that their communities are struggling to overcome and/or the inability of these urban districts to effect dramatic academic turnaround with far too limited resources.

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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.