

Testimony H.B. 6502

My name is Mark Ribbens. I am the coordinator of the Open Choice program for Cooperative Educational Services which serves the 17 school districts in lower Fairfield County. At C.E.S. we coordinate and provide the transportation services for Open Choice students in the Bridgeport region. We currently have 183 students who reside in Bridgeport attending public school in six suburban districts.

While there are many positive things in this bill, overall the bill is not helpful to advance our mission of reducing racial, ethnic and economic isolation in the Bridgeport region. I believe the "Crandall school program" in section 1 is a great innovation, however, it will not be offered in our region.

I was pleased to see that the transportation grant was increased (section 2) until I realized that it also did not apply to our region.

In section 3 I am glad to see that we are not limiting our efforts to only students enrolled in public schools, but the reality for Bridgeport is that last year we had over 450 applications for the 15 seats that were available. This year, we are on target to have as many applications, but given the economy, school districts may have fewer seats for Choice students, so again, over 99% of the families who apply will not be successful in the lottery for their children. I see the net effect as more students vying for the same number of or fewer seats.

As I read further in section 3 I see that the transportation grant for our region will remain flat, as will the grants to the school districts. Based on this year's allocation we are running a deficit in the transportation account of about \$235,000, and we needed to secure supplemental funding for that account. I don't believe operating costs are going to decrease in the years to come.

While I believe this bill will increase enrollment in school choice programs in the Hartford region, I am disheartened that our kids in Bridgeport may be left behind. I implore you to find a way to increase support for all Open Choice students.