CGA Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing February 21, 2012
HB 5014 AA Making Adjustments to State Expenditures and Revenues for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2013
Comments on Department of Education Appropriations Submitted by Katherine Wilson, School Finance Specialist

The League of Women Voters of Connecticut appreciates the opportunity to comment today on HB 5014 and the initiatives it contains aimed at improving education across the state.

We believe that under most circumstances local communities should retain control of the instructional programs and spending allocations in their schools. When a substantial number of students in a district are failing to attain state and federal achievement goals, it is appropriate for the state to step in and work with the district to analyze the problem and seek improvement. If the problem is particularly acute, however, the state is justified in adopting extraordinary measures directed at raising levels of achievement. Unfortunately, in Connecticut today the problem is acute and longstanding in too many of our schools, and such extraordinary measures are definitely called for. We therefore support the governor's Commissioner's Network, Talent Development, and other initiatives designed to support intensive intervention, improved instruction, increased innovation, and improved college readiness. These measures are mainly and properly targeted at the state's lowest performing districts, but many will benefit students all across the state as well.

We also believe that high quality early childhood education programs are among the measures that can be effective in helping children, particularly those at risk, reach their full academic potential, and we support the governor's proposed increases in funding for pre-K slots in Priority School Districts and for School Readiness Quality Enhancement.

The League likewise supports voluntary programs designed to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation in the belief that students receive a complete education only in classrooms that reflect the diversity of the adult world they will enter. Governor Malloy's proposed increases in funding for the Sheff Settlement and for magnet schools seem to us a reasonable way to increase the availability of such an education to Connecticut's children.

Bearing in mind both current fiscal constraints and our longstanding conviction that the state should ultimately fund 50% of the overall cost of local public elementary and secondary education, the League supports the modest proposed $50 million increase in the basic Education Cost Sharing grant. In the belief that state monies should offer incentives for municipalities to execute effective educational strategies, we also support giving the state's lowest performing districts conditional increases larger than those given to other districts.

The League does not believe, however, that ECS monies, the principal means by which the state seeks to fulfill its constitutional obligation toward public education, should be awarded outside the

parameters of the ECS formula. While we would much prefer that the $4.5 million the governor has set aside as a competitive ECS grant be used instead to further augment basic ECS funding, if the state does choose to award this money on a competitive basis, we believe it should be designated as a separate grant with its own line item in the budget.

Likewise, the Charter School grant should not be incorporated into the ECS grant. The Charter School grant is not subject to the ECS formula, nor is it a Payment to Local Government. Folding it into the Education Equalization Grants line item in the budget represents unnecessary obfuscation of an already complex grant, poor accounting procedure, and reduced public disclosure.

We also oppose several other elements of the governor's proposed changes to ECS.

- No local contribution to state charter schools should be required. Towns receive no ECS for their resident students who attend state charter schools, and they have no control over state charter school governance. Furthermore, a $1,000 per student local contribution would take significant dollars away from some of our poorest school districts—$1.7 million from Bridgeport, $1.2 million from Hartford, $1.8 million from New Haven—and would severely blunt the impact of the proposed ECS increases to these towns.
- Rather than increasing the Charter School grant by 17% from $9,400 to $11,000 at a cost of $14.1 million, we would rather see the state apply more of its limited resources to the ECS grant itself, the grant that funds the local public schools attended by the vast majority of Connecticut children.
- The League believes every school district should receive a minimum per-pupil state aid and therefore opposes reducing the Minimum Aid Ratio for most wealthy communities to 0%.
- The Foundation, the basic element of the ECS formula, should be based on current educational costs and should be derived by a methodology encoded in statute. The governor's proposed $12,000 Foundation, while a major improvement over the current outdated $9,867, appears to be an arbitrary round number arrived at by unknown means. We would prefer a new Foundation, like its predecessor, equal to the amount spent for the 80th percentile needs student three years prior to the current biennium.
- The proposed Minimum Budget Requirement, with its arbitrary local contribution percentages for conditional districts, is based on what towns have been spending rather than what they should be spending for education. We would prefer a Minimum Expenditure Requirement based on an appropriate Foundation multiplied by the number of needs students as defined in the ECS formula. The state should also require that increases in ECS be used for an equivalent rise in local per pupil education spending.

The League believes the data elements used in the ECS formula should reflect the best, most current information available, and we support adding students in bilingual programs to needs students counts in the belief that doing so will enhance that measure's accuracy. Recognizing the problems inherent in the student poverty and personal income measures currently in use, we will support changes to these as well when we are convinced that better measures are available. At this time, we need more information regarding Husky A child counts and Department of Economic and Community Development median household income data in order to judge whether they are indeed improvements over the present measures.

Thank you for allowing us to share our ideas with you today on this important legislation.