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Ray Rossomando
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*Before the
Appropriations Committee*

**Re: H.B. No. 5014 An Act Making Adjustments To State
Expenditures And Revenues For The Fiscal Year Ending June
30, 2013.**

February 21, 2012

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, Legislative Coordinator for the Connecticut Education Association representing 43,000 members who are active and retired teachers across the state. I am testifying today on Governor Malloy's midterm budget adjustments and their impact on public education.

I am here tonight to speak on HB 5014, which includes Governor Malloy's proposed \$128 million increased investment in public education. Included in the \$128 million is \$7 million toward early childhood programs, \$54 million in additional education cost sharing funding, additional funding for magnet schools and other schools of choice, and \$24.8 million for the commissioner's network of persistently low-performing schools.

Early Childhood Education

It is clear that when so many children start school without the early childhood opportunities experienced by others, the achievement gap is born. If we truly want to close the achievement gap, we cannot continue to delay expansions to high-quality, accredited early childhood education programs. Everyone agrees that investing in early childhood education will increase student achievement while reducing the future costs of governmental programs, including special education and child welfare. A recent study found a return on public investment in early education of 11 to 1.

Connecticut has postponed this investment for too long. Its fiscal commitment to early childhood peaked a decade ago. While we are pleased to see an increase in school readiness seats, the state's commitment is still woefully short of the need. Governor Malloy's midterm budget adjustments increase funding for early childhood programs by only \$7 million. Of this \$7 million, \$4 million would provide greater access to the Early Childhood School Readiness program. We need to invest much more at this critical juncture of children's lives.

ECS

We are pleased to see long-needed increases in ECS funding and the statutory foundation level, which was raised to \$12,000. We recognize that without a commitment to full-funding, ECS grant allocations should be phased-in, rather than based on arbitrary increases. However, there are certain policy changes to ECS funding that run contrary to the formula's purpose, dictated by *Horton v. Meskill* (*Horton*), to equalize funding for education based on each town's ability to pay.

First, the governor's ECS proposal would, for the first time, require districts to adopt specific policy proposals as a condition for receiving ECS increases. It appears to give unprecedented powers for distributing new ECS funds to the commissioner of education. The consequence of this change would be to shift significant authority from local elected boards to the State Department of Education, particularly the commissioner. More significantly, conditioning ECS increase on specific local policy decisions may create barriers to funding that run contrary to *Horton*.

Second, the governor's proposal makes the nonsensical leap of folding funding for charter schools into the ECS formula. Charter school funding has absolutely nothing to do with the court-driven purpose of ECS funding. Folding charter school funding into ECS is a strategy more consistent with so-called "money follows the child" proposals. Such proposals divert ECS funding away from local neighborhood schools in violation of *Horton*.

Furthermore, although the governor's proposals provide long-awaited increases in state funding for local schools, they unfortunately give with one hand, while taking with the other. The proposals do this by incorporating another "money follows the child" proposal that would require towns to send local tax dollars to schools outside of its own school district – namely charter schools. The net impact of this provision is to divert \$6.5 million of local tax dollars from local school districts. The impact of this provision is significant:

For example, Bridgeport, which currently receives about \$7,800 in ECS per student from the state, would now be required by the state to send \$1,000 of its local tax dollars outside of the district for each student who attends a charter school. The same would be true for New Haven, which receives about \$8,000 from the state in per pupil ECS funding.

For districts like Bridgeport and New Haven, which are each underfunded by over \$20 million each, the governor's proposal would redirect more than \$1.6 million of each city's tax dollars to schools outside of their districts.

CEA supports funding proposals that lift all boats (including charter, magnet, and local neighborhood schools) equitably. However, such “money follows the child” proposals that redirect local tax-dollars outside of the district risk doing irreversible harm to students in classrooms already starved for adequate resources. And, they simply run contrary to the state’s obligation to equalize education funding based on each town’s ability to pay.

Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR)

Historically, the MBR – and its predecessor, the Minimum Expenditure Requirement or MER – have been put in place to condition receipt of ECS funds on municipalities doing their part to fund local schools. Traditionally, and with few exceptions, the MBR and MER required increases in ECS to be wholly allocated to local schools. The goal has been to set a floor on local effort and to prevent municipal bodies from using state education cost sharing funds to supplant municipal spending or be diverted to property tax relief.

However, with ECS allocations having been frozen since 2009, the MBR was amended to require districts (with limited exceptions) to budget only at least as much for their public schools as was budgeted the prior year. This freezing of the MBR has been an exception, and not the norm.

Under the governor’s proposal, every district would receive an increase in ECS funding. As has historically been the case, the related MBR should require municipalities to allocate ECS fund increases to their local schools. The governor’s proposal does not correct the MBR for this.

We urge legislators to fix the MBR so that it raises the minimum required local budgeting in parallel with each town’s ECS increase. This would protect against funds being redirected to other, non-school related purposes. More importantly, it is a protection that is consistent with the goals of Horton.

Funding for School Choice Programs

CEA supports increases to schools of choice so long as the increases are in proportion to increases for all other school districts and do not divert funds from other public schools. As noted above, the governor’s proposed changes to charter school funding do not meet this test. We urge committee members to support increases to schools of choice that are fair and avoid creating a competition of winners and losers at the expense of children in other public schools.

To this end, CEA has been advocating for a more coherent system of funding for schools of choice. We understand that the governor’s ECS Task Force will continue its work over the coming year and address the funding systems for magnet, charter, vocational-technical, agricultural-science, and other schools of choice. We urge lawmakers to let the task force complete its work before making any significant changes to choice funding systems.

It is also important that legislators reject proposals to fold funding for choice schools into the ECS formula. Such a change would contaminate the court-directed purpose of ECS. Also, as much as ECS is driven by the Horton court decision, school choice programs in Connecticut are

not. The applicable court decision regarding choice schools, particularly magnet schools, is *Sheff v. O'Neill*, which addresses the goal of reducing racial isolation. Under the *Sheff* decision, the state is obligated to provide a substantially equal educational opportunity. CEA urges lawmakers to consider these distinctions when determining the most appropriate mechanisms for funding various schools models and when determining the appropriate fiscal commitment.

Commissioner's Network Schools

We support the governor's proposal to provide targeted funding to the commissioner's network schools representing the lowest-performing students. While we reserve judgment regarding the specific policy proposals that would implement the commissioner's network, we recognize and support the realization that additional funding is necessary to continually improve the learning environment in these schools.

One strategy that has been shown to promote improved learning is to provide a broader scope of "wrap-around" services to children most in need. Wrap-around programs include access to social services, including health care. The governor's budget appears to reduce funding for school based health clinics by \$400,000 (4%). We believe this change to be going in the wrong direction. Access to health care and other social services is a very important ingredient toward maximizing educational opportunity in our neediest communities.

In closing, if Connecticut is truly going to provide substantially equal educational opportunity and continually enhance its economic competitiveness, it is incumbent on the state to meet its financial commitment to adequately and equitably fund its schools. In short, education must become a more significant state priority if we are ever to equalize opportunity and create sustainable job growth.

CEA is pleased that the governor's mid-term budget provides an additional \$128 million in public school funding. But, for Connecticut schools to close persistent achievement gaps and provide educational opportunities worthy of its national and international competitors, this increase is only a start.

Thank you.