

My name is Mark Ribbens and I am testifying in my role as the Open Choice coordinator for the Bridgeport region a position I have held for the last three school years.

In our region Open Choice allows Bridgeport students to attend school in nearby districts. Currently we serve 177 students in grades 1-12 attending school in six suburban school districts. In the winter we inform parents of the program and accept applications. Later in the spring each of school districts informs us of openings they will have for the following year. We conduct lotteries to place the students in the receiving districts, coordinate and monitor the transportation of students, and also support both the school and family as the student transitions into his or her new school district. The receiving districts receive a small grant, which was increased this year, for each Open Choice student they enroll to cover extra expenses they may incur. Once a student is accepted into the program they become, for all intents and purposes, a student of that school district until they graduate from high school.

To transport students we operate 15 buses, many of which transport students to more than one school. For example after our bus for Staples High School in Westport drops our Bridgeport students off, it returns to Bridgeport to take students to an elementary school in Trumbull.

The Open Choice program is fairly small in Fairfield County, but based on my previous experience as a principal in a school accepting Open Choice students, and as coordinator, it is beneficial to both the Bridgeport students enrolled in the program and the students in the receiving school in reducing racial, ethnic, and economic isolation. In addition, based on surveys I have conducted, and analysis of standardized test scores, Open Choice students are academically more successful than their peers who remain in the Bridgeport Public Schools.

Currently we receive a grant of \$3,250 per student to provide transportation and we are allowed to seek supplemental funding from the State Department of Education. In my three years coordinating this program we have been granted almost \$700,000 in supplemental funding in order to keep the buses running.

Under the proposed changes in S.B. 301 we will receive \$2,000 per student and there is no provision to seek supplemental funding. Under this scenario \$505,000 in expenses would have been unfunded this year and cumulatively that figure would have been 1.3 million dollars over the last three years.

Since there is no other source of funding for Choice transportation that I know of, based on my three years of experience if this provision passes, we could not provide transportation for the entire school year for our Bridgeport students to attend school in the district they have been part of for all of their school years.

That is why I ask you to oppose S.B. 301