



Testimony to the Education Committee

Alex Spurrier – Research and Policy Manager – February 15, 2013

My name is Alex Spurrier and I am the Research and Policy Manager for the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN), a statewide advocacy organization focused on ensuring that every child in Connecticut has access to a high-quality public education.

I want to thank Chairwoman Stillman, Chairman Fleischmann, and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony. I am here today to testify in favor of House Bill 6375, An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor Concerning Education, but with some serious reservations.

This bill presents a rare opportunity to address a fundamentally broken school funding system that has failed to put students and their learning needs first. If we are serious about ensuring that every child will have access to a great public education, regardless of race, income, or ZIP code, we need to fix how we distribute education funds to schools across Connecticut.

Connecticut's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula, which allocates over \$2 billion a year, relies on decade-old data and has been altered more than two dozen times. The resulting formula does an incredibly poor job of fairly serving all of Connecticut's students:

- It funds schools inconsistently based on student need and town wealth;
- It fails to consistently direct funding to the children who need it the most; and
- It restricts the options of the thousands of Connecticut families who wish to exercise public school choice.

As you know, our state is facing a growing budget gap, forcing you – our elected representatives – to make difficult fiscal choices. But the billions of dollars we spend each year on educating our children are not being used efficiently. That must change.

We must be sure that our scarce education dollars are spent effectively, efficiently, and equitably.

Connecticut outspends almost every other state in the country on education per student, yet we have the largest achievement gap in the country. Connecticut's top performing students are falling behind the top students in Massachusetts. And, our lowest-income 4th grade students perform math at a lower level than similar students in 47 states.¹

Connecticut's children deserve better. If we're going to provide the great public education our students deserve, we need to ensure that all children are funded fairly, regardless of the public school they attend.

There are some positive elements in H.B. 6357, such as:

¹ National Assessment of Educational Progress. 2011. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/naeptools.asp>

- Increased conditional funding for the Alliance Districts that serve the vast majority of Connecticut's low-income and English Language Learner students;
- Using Free and Reduced Price Lunch to measure poverty for the ECS formula, which will help identify more students that have additional learning needs;
- Changing the measure for town wealth in the ECS formula to Median Household Income, which helps provide a more accurate picture; and
- A reduction in the ECS formula's minimum aid ratio, which reflects the need for the state to invest its scarce education dollars in communities less able to raise local revenue for education.

These are important and overdue changes, but this bill does not address the fundamental issue.

All students in public schools must be funded fairly.

If H.B. 6357 is enacted in its present form, the thousands of students who are enrolled in public charter, magnet, and vo-tech schools would continue to be funded in separate and unequal ways.

The ECS formula changes in this bill propose higher foundation amounts (\$11,754) plus 30 percent additional funding for students who live in poverty. Even if this formula were fully funded, thousands of students at public schools of choice would still be funded through different systems, with no additional funding for students in poverty. For example, if a low-income student who moves from a traditional public school to a high-quality public charter school would receive \$4,280 less funding from the state. If that student stayed in a high-quality public charter school from Kindergarten to graduation, our state would spend \$55,643 less on his or her education than it would if he or she had stayed in a traditional public school

That is fundamentally unfair.

If we are serious about ensuring access to a great public education for every child, we must take a stand — as a state — and fund all public school students fairly.

This bill makes some good incremental changes to the ECS formula, but we need to set our sights on more fundamental reforms to our school finance system. We must create a consistent, transparent, and equitable school finance system. The goal must be to fund all students fairly, across all our public schools. Connecticut's goal must be a system that delivers on the promise of a great public education for all of our students.

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