

Testimony
Submitted to the
Education Committee

March 4, 2013

H.B. No. 6507 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING A SLIDING TUITION SCALE FOR PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS OFFERED AT INTERDISTRICT MAGNET SCHOOL PROGRAMS.

S.B. No. 998 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICE CENTER BUDGETS

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Bye, Representative McCrory, and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Dr. Bruce Douglas, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC). CREC provides extensive educational support and professional development services throughout the state of Connecticut, manages five highly accomplished and specialized programs for student with disabilities, and operates 18 successful interdistrict magnet schools in the greater Hartford area.

I am testifying today on **House Bill 6507**, An Act Concerning a Sliding Tuition Scale for Preschool Programs Offered at Interdistrict Magnet School Programs, and **Senate Bill 998**, An Act Concerning Regional Educational Service Center Budgets.

I wish to share my concerns regarding **House Bill 6507**, which proposes the creation of a sliding scale for parent pay in order to cover the cost of student tuitions for “preschool” programs in Sheff magnet schools. The Sheff Settlement does not call for any preschool programs. The 3 and 4 year old children attending CREC Magnet Schools are in academically intensive early childhood education programs. The only difference between our early childhood programs and our Kindergarten programs is that our 3 and 4 year old students take a nap.

Adding early childhood education to the Sheff magnet schools was not a strategic decision. Rather, this reactionary decision was made by the State Department of Education and OPM in order to hurriedly meet the benchmarks associated with the Settlement Agreement. School districts and parents should not be held responsible for this decision. We agree that the current funding arrangement is becoming increasingly oppressive and debilitating to our school districts; it is the State’s obligation to cover the cost of students in these programs. Rather than pushing these costs to parents, we recommend the State modify the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula to account for the number of students attending magnet schools when calculating each school district’s ECS grant.

As the Superintendent of nine Sheff magnet schools with early childhood programs, I can assure you that requiring parents to pay tuition will threaten our ability to maintain racial balance in these programs. When a student is enrolled in a magnet school early childhood program, they automatically advance into that school’s elementary program following their early childhood years. For those parents who desire a high quality, integrated educational setting for their child’s elementary and secondary education, this legislation would compel them to pay for early childhood in order to have access to those settings in later years. This has repercussions for the social justice mission of Sheff and the State of Connecticut.

Further, House Bill 6507 insufficiently defines the structure for determining this tuition. It is likely that Free and Reduced-Price Lunch will be considered as a means of determining a family’s ability to pay. However, it is important to note, that not all students who are eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch are identified on the direct certification list that is available from the Department of Social Services. Some students are determined eligible through alternative means, such as through an application after they have been accepted to and have enrolled in the school. Parents would not know, previous to the

application and admission, whether they would be charged tuition to attend. Some families may simply not apply.

Although we disagree with this policy, CREC will work with the state to make any arrangement a successful one. This funding dilemma is further evidence of a series of impulsive and misguided decisions around Sheff. We cannot continue to replicate this situation; the State must determine a long-term strategy for funding these programs. Only 22 of Connecticut's school districts are required to comply under a court order to respond to the Sheff vs. O'Neill Settlement Agreement, which has a significant and debilitating financial impact on those school district and their municipalities. Modifying the ECS formula to adjust for court-ordered compliance for student enrollment in magnet schools is the only just means of addressing this dilemma.

In regards to proposed **Senate Bill 998**, the Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs) are already required to provide the information outlined in this bill. Our reporting requirements are defined in Section 10-66g and Section 10-66h of the Connecticut General Statutes¹. Additionally, the reporting requirements for our magnet school expenditures and our maximum magnet operating budget per pupil are defined in Section 10-264l². The RESCs' spending and accounting practices are transparent and consistently and comprehensively reported to the State Board of Education. In so far as our last audited financials show that 48% of CREC's budget comes from the State, we would be pleased to provide this information in a line item of the State's budget.

Furthermore, Senate Bill 998 calls for this information to be provided online. Currently, CREC's Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, which includes the accounts and financial records from CREC's annual audit, and CREC's Annual Report, which provides extensive details about the agency's expenditures and program results, have been available on our website at http://www.crec.org/crec/about/crec_cafr.php and http://www.crec.org/crec/about/crec_ar.php for the past six years.

CREC offers our guidance and support to the Committee. Thank you for your kind consideration of our recommendations and your enduring commitment to our state.

¹ From CT Statutes Section 10-66g "Each board of a regional educational service center shall submit a yearly budget and projected revenue statement to each member board of education and to the State Board of Education. The accounts and financial records of all regional educational services centers shall be audited annually in the same manner as the accounts of local boards of education and copies provided to each member board of education and the State Board of Education."

From CT Statutes Section 10-66h "The board of a regional educational service center shall annually, following the close of the year, furnish each member board of education and the State Board of Education an evaluation of the programs and services provided by the regional educational service center."

² From CT Statutes Section 10-264l (n) (1): "Each interdistrict magnet school operated by a regional educational service center shall annually file with the Commissioner of Education a financial audit in such form as prescribed by the commissioner."

From CT Statutes Section 10-264l (2)(D) "For a magnet school not operated by a local or regional board of education, the commissioner shall only approve a proposed operating budget that, on a per pupil basis, does not exceed the maximum allowable threshold established in accordance with this subdivision. The maximum allowable threshold shall be an amount equal to one hundred twenty per cent of the state average of the quotient obtained by dividing net current expenditures, as defined in section 10-261, by average daily membership, as defined in said section, for the fiscal year two years prior to the fiscal year for which the operating grant is requested."