



Testimony of
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Government Administration & Elections Committee
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HB 5900 AN ACT REQUIRING MORE TRANSPARENCY IN EDUCATION

Good afternoon Senator Musto, Representative Jutila and members of the Government Administration & Elections Committee. My name is Steve McKeever and I am First Vice President of AFT Connecticut, a diverse state federation of union of nearly 29,000 public and private sector employees including state employees, nurses, healthcare workers, teachers and other school personnel. I am here today to testify in favor of HB 5900, An Act Requiring More Transparency in Education.

AFT Connecticut and other advocates for clean government worked very hard to enact common sense, transparent state contracting protocols after severe failures were identified in the UConn 2000 and I-84 construction projects and charges of corruption became commonplace in previous administrations. In 2007, the General Assembly, lead by this committee, enacted sweeping changes to state contracting practices and established the State Contracting Standards Board to make sure actions of the past would never be repeated. That is why AFT Connecticut was disappointed to learn that last year, in the name of expediency, the State Department of Education bypassed clean contracting requirements by awarding several no-bid contracts to private consultants through its non-profit, the State Education Resource Center (SERC).

Connecticut's clean contracting law requires a state agency to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine if it is financially advantageous to contract work outside existing agency resources. Then, an RFP is issued to solicit competitive bids. Prospective vendors must submit sealed bids and agencies then select among them. Though it is a non-profit organization funded primarily by the State Department of Education, SERC was not required to follow these protocols.

HB 5900 would make SERC, and other state agency established non-profit organizations, subject to the clean contracting law, requiring it to comply with state procurement and competitive bidding requirements. In addition, it would require the Commissioner of Education to report annually to the General Assembly (1) all contracts issued to private contractors and RESCs; and (2) the amounts and sources of all private funding used to pay State Department of Education employee and consultant salaries.

At a time when public dollars are scarce and educational needs are so great, it is important to understand where every state education dollar is being spent. In fact, education advocates, including the Governor and the Commissioner of Education, felt so strongly about the need for transparent education budgets that they included a requirement in last year's education reform law that mandates local boards of education, charters schools and regional educational service centers (RESCs) adopt common charts of accounts so that direct comparisons could be made and potential discrepancies could be easily identified. We believe strongly that HB 5900 would require SERC and the Department of Education to embrace the spirit of that standard.

We are aware that the Department of Education has developed its own legislative proposal in response to the SERC controversy. AFT Connecticut welcomes the opportunity to work collaboratively with the Department and this committee to create practices that enhance transparency and make certain that we do not return to the days of shadowy operations and zero accountability.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I urge you to support HB 5900 and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.