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Ray Rossomando
Connecticut Education Association
Before the
Appropriations Committee

Re: Governor's Bill 5030 – Department of Education

February 24, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, a research and policy development specialist with the Connecticut Education Association. CEA represents 43,000 active and retired teachers across the state.

While there are other representatives from CEA speaking on various aspects of the Governor's proposed FY15 budget revisions, my testimony will be confined to Department of Education funding, primarily with respect to the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant and implementation of various new education policy initiatives.

CEA Supports increased funding for implementation of education initiatives, particularly funds that can be made available for professional learning and to provide resources to help teachers implement the many new evaluation and common core initiatives impacting schools, teachers, and their classrooms.

CEA commends the Governor for including in the FY15 budget \$40 million in scheduled ECS increases. However, CEA does not support changes to the ECS formula as written in Governor's Bill 5030.

Talent Development

Governor Malloy's budget shifts funding from programs that we understand to be phased out (e.g. relating to the old BEST program) to provide a net increase of \$3.5 million (34%) to the Talent Development line item. CEA supports increases in this line item provided they support teachers in the front lines. We urge lawmakers to target funds in this line item toward helping educators implement the many new initiatives being mandated on them and their schools. For example, resources needed by educators include, but are not limited to:

- Access to training relating to teacher evaluation methods, documentation and data collection, as noted in the recently revised Performance Evaluation and Advisory Committee (PEAC) Guidelines for Educator Evaluation;
- Resources to help implement new national common core standards;
- More time to collaborate with peers, develop new curricula, and research and reinvent lesson plans;
- Funding for ongoing professional learning opportunities consistent with their schools' needs and mission.

We urge lawmakers to support increased investments in the teaching profession at a time when so much is being asked of Connecticut teachers, parents, children, and local communities.

ECS

Last session the legislature incorporated sensible revisions to the ECS formula. There is still more work to be done, particularly in creating a foundation in the formula that truly represents the cost of providing a sufficient educational opportunity to every child in Connecticut. But in light of the budgetary challenges our state has faced the positive steps toward full-funding and the Governor's commitment to educational investments during his tenure have been commendable.

Nevertheless, as many know, grants to most towns calculated under the ECS formula exceed the amount appropriated to them in the state budget. As a result, 121 municipalities are underfunded to the tune of \$766 million, which is about \$1,275 per student (on average). The ECS formula enacted last year includes a new phase-in toward full funding, with needier towns scheduled to receive a greater share of their underfunding over time.¹

However, ECS factors such as town wealth, enrollment, poverty, income, and others can change year-to-year. This means that the total amount of ECS grant funds owed to each town could change each year as well; and with it the amount of underfunding. As a result, Governor's Bill 5030 underfunds municipalities an additional \$7 million this year and increases the total amount of ECS underfunding at a time when the gap should be closing.

¹ For FY14 the state's neediest districts (i.e. "Reform Districts") received 12% of their underfunding. Alliance districts were provided 8% of the underfunding and remaining districts 1%. For FY15 the phase-in amounts increase to 21.6%, 14.4%, and 1.8% of a municipality's underfunding respectively.

The reason for this additional underfunding is that the Governor's proposed budget does not annualize ECS data. ECS grants to towns in FY15 are proposed to be set at the amounts enacted under the original budget. In order to accomplish this, the Governor's budget completely throws out the ECS formula with the proverbial bath water. In its place, Governor's Bill 5030 simply places town grant amounts into statute – a maligned practice that last year's ECS reform was instituted to prevent.

One rationale that you might hear for doing this is predictability. And while predictability is a good and achievable goal, it should not come at the cost of throwing out the ECS formula. The recent ECS Task Force discussed methods for smoothing out year-to-year volatility and for ensuring predictability. Suspending the ECS formula and decoupling it from data was not one of them.

Another rationale you might hear is that if the ECS formula were to be annualized for FY15, there could be some towns that would see their grants decrease. This argument is a red herring. There are 121 towns that are underfunded by the state, some significantly. If the formula is annualized (as it should be), the state would owe a little less for 55 of those towns – but those 55 towns are still significantly underfunded. There is no reason for a town that is owed ECS money from the state to get a cut. It would be disingenuous to argue that these 55 towns should get a decrease in ECS when holding them harmless (and maintaining the integrity of ECS formula) would cost so little (\$1.5 million).

We ask this committee to preserve the operation and integrity of the ECS formula while keeping the funding promises made to public schools and municipalities – especially those most harmed by underfunding. The cost to accomplish this would be \$7 million; including a hold harmless that protects underfunded towns from receiving even less of the money than they are owed. Annualizing ECS for FY15 would preserve ECS and be consistent with other areas of the education budget that are proposed to receive annualized increases (such as the Sheff Settlement).

While we believe this to be an important correction to this year's proposal, CEA urges lawmakers to recognize that our education finance infrastructure continues to require collective attention.

Our school districts face increasing student educational needs, more complex systems of teaching and learning, and the challenge of doing more with less. Our towns face snowballing state and federal mandates and rising costs of unfunded special education. There is still much to do to bring our funding system up to the standards our students deserve. Preserving the integrity of the ECS formula and the state's commitment to fund it is a fundamental step.

Thank you for your consideration.