



**Testimony
Betsy Gara
Connecticut Council of Small
Towns Before the
Education Committee
March 17, 2014**

1. SB-472- AN ACT CONCERNING STATE FUNDING FOR EDUCATION AND THE BUDGETS OF BOARDS OF EDUCATION
2. SB-473 - AN ACT CONCERNING MAGNET SCHOOLS
3. SB-475 - AN ACT CONCERNING AUTHORIZATION OF STATE GRANT COMMITMENTS FOR SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECTS AND CONCERNING CHANGES TO THE STATUTES CONCERNING SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECTS.
4. HB-5559 - AN ACT CONCERNING A UNIFORM REGIONAL SCHOOL CALENDAR
5. HB-5560 - AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION MANDATE RELIEF
6. HB- 5562 - AN ACT CONCERNING SPECIAL EDUCATION
7. HB-5565 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE MINIMUM BUDGET REQUIREMENT
8. HB-5567 - AN ACT CONCERNING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

1. COST *supports* **Section 1 of SB-472, AN ACT CONCERNING STATE FUNDING FOR EDUCATION AND THE BUDGETS OF BOARDS OF EDUCATION**. This bill delays the implementation of the Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA). The UCOA involves providing additional financial information to the state in order to provide greater transparency regarding the school budget process. COST supports efforts to provide greater transparency in the school budget process but understands that there are still issues to determine regarding the rollout of the UCOA. Regarding Section 4 of the bill, COST urges lawmakers to analyze the costs associated with this change on municipal budgets.

2. COST *supports* **SB-473, AN ACT CONCERNING MAGNET SCHOOLS**, which will provide school districts with more timely information on who will be enrolled in a magnet school. Having this information as soon as possible provides boards of education with information on how enrollment changes may affect class size and staffing requirements to allow them to budget more efficiently.

3. COST *supports* provisions in **SB-475, AN ACT CONCERNING AUTHORIZATION OF STATE GRANT COMMITMENTS FOR SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECTS AND CONCERNING CHANGES TO THE STATUTES CONCERNING SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECTS**, regarding school safety. Although there should be minimum school security parameters for all schools, the proposed changes to the grant program recognize that school officials need the flexibility to tailor school security plans to address their district's specific needs.



4. COST *supports* **HB-5559, AN ACT CONCERNING A UNIFORM REGIONAL SCHOOL CALENDAR**, which delays by one year the implementation date for the regional school calendar, recognizing that many school districts have already adopted the school calendar for 2015. We also urge lawmakers to require information regarding the regional school calendar to be communicated to municipal officials and the public to ensure a smooth transition.

5. COST *supports* **HB-5560, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION MANDATE RELIEF**, which requires the task force to provide specific mandate relief measures to the General Assembly for consideration.

6. COST *supports* the provisions in **HB- 5562, AN ACT CONCERNING SPECIAL EDUCATION**, aimed at increasing special education funding. COST continues to be concerned that the state has not made progress in assisting towns in meeting special education needs. The local share of special education now exceeds \$1.8 billion, accounting for roughly 22% of all education spending in Connecticut. Special education costs continue to drive up education budgets across the state, regardless of the relative wealth of a community. Moreover, the costs associated with the provision of special education services are very unpredictable, creating difficulty in managing and budgeting costs at the local level. As proposed, the tiered system for reimbursing towns for special education costs will help increase state support for the delivery of these services. In addition, COST supports efforts to eliminate the cap on special education funding, which reduces reimbursements to municipalities.

7. COST *opposes* **HB-5565, AN ACT CONCERNING THE MINIMUM BUDGET REQUIREMENT**. The Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR), which requires towns to appropriate at least the same amount for education as they did the previous year, undermines the efforts of towns to achieve cost savings to reduce education spending. Many school districts are aggressively pursuing cost saving measures, such as renegotiating insurance contracts, participating in consortiums to purchase oil and gas, revamping bus routes to reduce transportation costs, offering early retirement incentives to reduce personnel costs and utilizing technology to reduce paper and printing costs. Towns and school districts are also exploring options to reduce costs by sharing certain functions, such as building and grounds maintenance and IT support.

Unfortunately, the MBR undermines such efforts because towns do not have the flexibility and certainty needed to reflect such cost savings in their education budgets. Under current law, a town may reduce its MBR under certain circumstances, including to reflect *half* of any new documented savings from (a) increased efficiencies within its school district, *as long as the education commissioner approves the savings*, or (b) a regional collaboration or cooperative arrangement with one or more other districts, limited to a maximum of 0.5% of FY 13's budgeted education appropriation.

However, towns and school districts need greater certainty as to how much relief they can expect from the MBR under these circumstances as well as greater flexibility to reduce spending where they have been able to achieve savings.



COST supports legislation to 1) increase the amount by which towns can reduce their Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) to reflect demonstrated cost savings and reductions in enrollment, and 2) clarify the process for obtaining a waiver from the state Dept. of Education so that towns are not faced with unnecessary penalties.

8. COST *opposes* **HB-5567, AN ACT CONCERNING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS**, which imposes a costly one-size-fits-all mandate on school districts to develop guidelines for alternative schools. Many school districts in small towns may have one or two students, if any, expelled in a given year and yet this bill would require the development and posting of guidelines regarding the program. Moreover, the bill requires school districts to provide an alternative school program to any students who may “benefit academically.” COST is concerned that this would siphon scarce resources away from local budgets to develop programs for a handful of students. The state already underfunds education, shifting the costs onto property taxpayers. This bill would add to these costs and undermine traditional educational programs.

COST is an advocacy organization committed to giving small towns a strong voice in the legislative process. Its members are Connecticut towns with populations of less than 30,000. COST champions the major policy needs and concerns of Connecticut’s suburban and rural towns.