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Ray Rossomando and Bob Namnoum
Connecticut Education Association
Before the
Education Committee

Regarding:

**SB 472 AAC State Funding for Education and the Budgets of Boards of
Education**
HB 5562 AAC Special Education
HB 5565 AAC the Minimum Budget Requirement
HB 5567 AAC Alternative Schools
SB 476 AAC the Academic Achievement Gap

March 17, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, Research and Policy Development Specialist with the Connecticut Education Association. Bob Namnoum is a UniServ Representative who works directly with local affiliates and their respective boards of education. Mr. Namnoum also serves on the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group.

We are here today testifying on a number of bills being heard:

SB 472 AAC State Funding for Education and the Budgets of Boards of Education

CEA supports provisions of this bill that reaffirm prohibitions against state education grants (i.e. ECS/Alliance grants) being supplanted or diverted to municipal accounts for non-education uses. Schools are continually being asked to do more and more with state funding that does not keep pace with needs and demands. CEA urges the committee to strengthen the non-supplant clause that is the subject of this section.

CEA reserves judgment on section 3, which appears to sunset a statutory provision that provides \$2.9 million to certain Priority School Districts.

CEA also reserves judgment on sections 4 and 6, which change the definition of real program expenditures (RPE) to include transportation and shift base per pupil funding levels for local charter schools from net current expenditures (NCE) to current program expenditures (CPE). The variables that comprise NCE and CPE are not the same. For example, NCE contains federal funding, as well as private and tuition sources – CPE does not. CPE contains transportation costs, NCE does not. The impact of these changes and their potential impact on other grants that reference these NCE, CPE, and RPE are unclear.

SB 476 AAC the Academic Achievement Gap

CEA supports section 2 of SB 476, which extends bi-lingual program duration from 30 months to 60.

CEA supports expanding full-day kindergarten into every district in the state. Unequal access to full-day kindergarten means some children start first grade further behind their peers in neighboring districts. This should not be the case.

However, SB 476 permits Alliance Districts to include all-day kindergarten expansion in their ECS-related Alliance District plans. As many know, ECS is significantly underfunded; Alliance Districts alone are underfunded by \$490 million. The Education Reform Act of 2012 created Alliance Districts and required, for the first time, that districts would have to apply to the commissioner of education for approval to receive a portion of their ECS underfunding.

CEA believes that Alliance Districts should not be required to jump through hoops in order to obtain ECS funds already due to them. Moreover, ECS funding for Alliance Districts has been insufficient to cover the new tasks required by the SDE.

Therefore, we remain concerned that Alliance Districts will not receive sufficient ECS funding to carry out their Alliance District plans, whether they include plans for full-day kindergarten or not.

CEA has advocated and continues to advocate for the expansion of full-day kindergarten statewide and urges the Education Committee to seek out innovative strategies for funding the start up of new programs beyond the limits of Alliance District ECS funding that is proposed for this year.

HB 5562 AAC Special Education

CEA strongly supports the efforts of Senator Osten reflected in sections 1 and 2, which designates dyslexia as a specific disability on IEP forms. Dyslexia is the most common form of learning disability, resulting in 18-20 percent of children struggling to read. Because of this prevalence, and related struggles parents encounter when seeking proper diagnosis and needed services, CEA believes that it is appropriate to add dyslexia to the list of eligible special education disabilities.

CEA does not support section 3 as written. Section 3 changes the state and local funding relationship with respect to special education costs (excess costs) that exceed local per pupil expenditures (PPE). The formula in the bill does not appear to address who pays excess costs between a district's PPE and 1½ times PPE. It simply doesn't add up.

Furthermore, the recent Task Force to Study State Education Funding (2011-13) and the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group (2013-14) brought together various leaders and specialists on this topic. The work of these entities does not appear to be reflected

in HB 5562. Consequently, CEA reserves judgment on this section until the formula is clearer and various special education funding options have been reviewed.

Connecticut school districts spend about \$1.7 billion on special education services a year, accounting for about 22% of all spending on schools. State law requires the State Department of Education to reimburse districts for excess costs that exceed 4½ times PPE. For FY15, the cost to implement this law was estimated to be about \$186 million. The state's Excess Cost grant is capped at \$140 million – a bit shy of current law and a far cry from the total need.

CEA continues to strongly support increases to special education funding grants from state and federal sources. Special education is an incredibly significant federal mandate and is indisputably a state obligation under the Connecticut's constitution. We urge the education committee to review the work of the MORE Commission and education funding task force as it considers formulas that increase the state's share of special education costs.

HB 5565 AAC the Minimum Budget Requirement

CEA interprets the impact of HB 5565 as preventing a municipality with separate regional and local school budgets from decreasing its budgeted appropriation for its local schools year-to-year.

CEA supports strong MBR protections that prevent municipalities from withholding needed resources from local schools. Such protections are especially important at a time when the Education Cost Sharing grant remains significantly underfunded and schools are asked to do so much.

HB 5567 AAC Alternative Schools

CEA supports HB 5567.

The current system of alternative education has resulted in the creation of some very high quality programs. However, not every area of the state is served by such programs. CEA supports enhancements to alternative school programs that promote equal opportunity to consistent high-quality programs across the state. Additionally, section 5 permits districts to provide alternative settings collaboratively. We believe that this option will help ensure that programs can be provided cost-effectively.

Alternative education programs can offer greater education opportunities to students who have not succeeded in the standard setting. When done well, they can provide targeted programming, more individualized attention, and creative delivery solutions for students facing unique challenges. However, their proliferation could also result in the creation of a second-class system and perceptions of tracking or steering students. It is vitally important that alternative education programs are kept to high standards, taught and run by certified educators, and are recognized by parents, employers, and institutions of higher education as comparable to any other local school.

We also caution lawmakers to not inadvertently open a door to the private management of alternative schools. The result could mean turning over schools to third parties that are less-accountable to the public and risk exposing some of our most needy students to a counter-productive experience.

Thank you.