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**Testimony for Appropriation Committee Public Hearing February 16, 2016
Written Testimony for HB5044 An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for FYE June 30, 2017**

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding HB 5044

My name is Teri Yonsky and I am the Director of Fiscal Services for Bethel Public Schools with over 12 years of experience in this field. I am also the Secretary/Treasurer of The Connecticut Association of School Business Officials (CASBO) a non-profit professional association that represents school business officials (SBOs) throughout the State of Connecticut. In May 2015, I was named the Celebrated SBO of the year for the State of Connecticut. SBOs work closely with school boards, administrators, staff, public officials and communities; and are responsible for most aspects of school business and operations. This includes, but not limited to, developing and monitoring school district budgets. CASBO appreciates the financial support for public education provided by the Governor and the legislature over the past years. We do offer the following comments with respect the Governor's budget recommendation for fiscal year 16-17 in hopes of continuing this support.

ECS Grant

The Governor's proposed budget reduces ECS by \$11.5 million from the FY17 budget included in the biennium budget approved in June 2015. Although this grant was increased in the recent past, the vast majority of these increases were targeted to the Alliance Districts. CASBO is grateful for the support of these 30 schools. However, it is important to note that for the non-alliance districts, there has been little or no increase in ECS for the past 7 years. This has occurred during a period of rising costs due to health insurance, energy, transportation, implementation of new standards, contractual obligations and the general cost of living on other costs, including unfunded mandates imposed on local districts. Many local municipalities continue to face economic challenges and are not able to fund these cost increases. As a result, programs are cut, needed expenses deferred and/or class sizes increased. We do acknowledge that some schools during this period have experienced enrollment declines. As a result, most schools have reduced staff and related costs to adjust for these enrollment declines, when feasible, keeping in mind that such declines are spread across many grade levels. In spite of these reductions and other efficiencies, other costs continue to rise.

For Bethel Public Schools, a suburban district, our enrollment of approximately 3000 has held steady and is projected to continue to remain stable through the next 10 years. But the face of Bethel has changed. Over the last ten years our sub-group populations have grown with increases in the number of ELL students and with our Free/Reduced eligible meal population going from 8% to 19%. These changes bring with them more student needs. However, our ECS Grant has remained flat and the formula has not been updated.

CASBO urges the legislature to maintain ECS funding for FY17 at the level approved in the biennium budget. Although this will not make up for the flat funding of the past, it will help offset for some of the increasing costs that local boards have had to bear (many as the result of unfunded mandates).

Excess Cost and Transportation Grants

The Excess Cost Grant, which has provided some relief for very expensive programs that meet the needs of children with special needs, has been underfunded for years. Under the Governor's proposed budget, this grant is reduced by over \$8 million (5.75%). This compromises the ability of school districts to provide adequate educational programs for all children. The transportation grant was established to partially reimburse districts for the mandated requirement to provide free transportation for students based on a statutory formula. Funding for this grant over the years has been well below the formula. This grant has been reduced over the last two budgets by over \$2.9 million. Cost for providing safe and efficient

transportation continues to rise. As a result, many schools have had to reduce or eliminate programs for other students to meet this mandated program. Although CASBO would like all grant caps removed and for the State to properly fund these important grants at their statutory levels, the grants should at least be restored to the budgeted levels as indicated above. Such action will help every public school district to maintain appropriate education opportunities for all students.

We also request that no new mandates be passed without adequate funding being provided. In Bethel 85% of our budget is personnel (wages & benefits). We always say that we are a people business where people equal programs and programs equal people. So, if a new mandate requires time from our staff, then it is not revenue neutral!

The education of our youth is a top priority for all of us. Proper funding at all levels is important to provide opportunities for successful outcomes. We ask the State to continue to fund its share.

CASBO appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Appropriation Committee on these important matters.

Sincerely,
Theresa D. Yonsky, CPA, MBA, SBO (085)
Bethel Public Schools Director of Fiscal Services