

TESTIMONY ON SB #542 AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE CT SPECIAL EDUCATION PREDICTABLE COST COOPERATIVE

February 21, 2017

Good morning members of the Insurance Committee, Chairman Larson and Chairman Kelly—thank you for allowing me to be here today.

My name is Nathan Quesnel and I am the Superintendent of East Hartford Public Schools. This morning, I would like to say a few words regarding my early understanding of SB#542, An Act Establishing the CT Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative. As a public school district Superintendent, I am greatly interested in legislation centering on the funding structures for special education and I appreciate this committee's interest in potential solutions to the challenges currently facing CT schools. In East Hartford, we currently have over 1200 students receiving special education services in district with an additional 269 out of district placements. These services result in a cost to the district of over 24% of our current operating budget or nearly \$21 million dollars. It is also important to note that for the 269 outplaced special needs students in East Hartford, the district is currently spending nearly \$4 million dollars. While as an educator I deeply believe in providing the highest quality services to our children with special needs, in East Hartford we continue to be concerned regarding capturing cost as well as being sure cost is predictable year to year.

SB#542 provides an interesting concept that I believe should be fully reviewed and considered. This act provides the authority to develop and introduce a Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative (the Co-op) which will enable state and local governments to share in special education costs while keeping decision making and controls at the local level. While the Co-op does not immediately cut or capture cost, the benefit we see in this proposal is a first attempt to highlight this significant financial issue, provide transparency and to make districts' special education costs more predictable. As you know from the language of the bill, the Co-op brings together local and state contributions including a reallocation of the ECS grant. Importantly, the Co-op will not raise the total cost of special education statewide nor will it reduce state aid for special education.

SB#542 is a concept that should be thoroughly and deeply reviewed. As a practicing educator, I urge the General Assembly to embrace this concept and commit to developing a task force or advisory to fully develop and ripen this concept. While I believe that there are significant questions for local communities regarding this new concept, I believe that a public commitment to learning and communicating the broad base design could provide a potential pathway forward for our state and local school district. In taking this position, we are going with other educational leadership groups to encourage the establishment of the Cooperative after existing questions and potential ambiguities have been cleared. Establishing predictability at the school district level for the cost of programming for special needs children has been a long sought after goal for those who are responsible for operating school systems. The proposal for a Co-op, if implemented appropriately, has the potential for the establishment of a system that meets this goal.

Thank you for your continued focus on improving the lives and opportunities of our Connecticut School children and for the time you took to listen to my thoughts this morning.