Testimony in opposition of:

House Bill 7418: An act concerning the State Budget for the biennium ending June thirteenth, 2021, and making appropriations therefor.

Submitted by: Brad Bernier
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Sen. Abrams, Rep. Rosario, and members of the Appropriations Committee for the bill above,

My name is Brad Bernier and I have the honor of serving as Chairman for the Colchester Board of Education. Joining me this evening is Vice Chair Ms. Renie Besaw. We are here to testify on House Bill 7418, specifically regarding the disbursement of ECS funds and the billing of municipalities for a portion of teacher retirement costs. Our community has the dubious distinction of facing the largest reduction in ECS funding, in dollars, of any community. On top of that there is a proposal that shifts funding responsibility for a portion of the teacher retirement obligation to our community. We are speaking in opposition.

Colchester is a community of just over 16,000 people, with a student population of just over 2,500 students. Our schools provide diversified programming for our students. We prepare our students for college with a multitude of AP opportunities as well as many dual enrollment classes. Many of our grads start college as second semester freshman- or greater. We provide strong visual and performing arts opportunities, a wide variety of sports, and two languages. Our Career Tech Ed program is a specific point of pride, with a recent partnership with the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board allowing for our students to have a path directly into a manufacturing job at Electric Boat or one of the many members of their supply chain. We are proud to say that we have graduates attending Ivies as well as graduates earning a very livable wage on the manufacturing floor of EB!!

You would think that all of this would necessitate large expenditures. It does not. In fact, our per-pupil expenditures have been some of the lowest in the State. For 2017, the last statewide data available, we were 135 of 168 in per pupil expenditure. In spite of that, our performance is well above the State average, with the district placing 33 of 168 on the State performance index. Colchester Public Schools provide a great return on investment.

How do we do it?

We share services. My custodians maintain Town buildings. Town groundskeepers maintain School fields and grounds. Our finance office is one of the few in Connecticut that is shared by both the Schools and the Town- and has been for decades.

We pursue efficiencies. We maintain a self-insurance fund for health care- shared with the Town. In a move towards further reducing redundancy, we provide for systems level budgeting. We have taken advantage of energy savings programs.

We develop relationships with our stakeholders. We engage our residents and our business community in our processes.
We pursue opportunities. We are currently pursuing opportunities with the Eastern CT Manufacturing Pipeline, an initiative put forward by the U.S. Department of Labor in partnership with the CT Department of Labor, with the goal of further enhancing our educational offerings.

A few days back, Senators Duff and Osten authored an article in the CT Post which reference what a UCONN study detailed as the “Optimal district size”. That district was 2,800 students, a number which provided for optimal educational achievement and cost effectiveness. We are a model of that “Optimal” district. We see educational achievement among our students and cost effectiveness.

What is our reward?

Our funding through the Educational Cost Sharing grant is proposed to be reduced more than any other district in the State, over the next biennium. Reducing our expenditures to account for these reductions will decimate much of what we have been able to accomplish. You are killing the model district.

What are we asking for?

Use our district as the model. Take our practices and share them with challenged district, not our funding.

While we understand that change may be needed, we ask that it be incremental. The plan from the last cycle was that. Arbitrarily accelerating the schedule will have a negative impact on ours and many other districts.

Thank you very much for providing us the opportunity to testify. If there are any questions, please feel free to contact me at any time using the following contact information.

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Chairman
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