Senator John W. Fonfara, Co-Chair
Representative Jason Rojas, Co-Chair
Senator Kevin Witkos, Ranking Member
Representative Christopher Davis, Ranking Member
Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 3100
300 Capital Avenue
Hartford, CT 06106

Regarding Raised Bill No. 1129: An Act Concerning Various Initiatives To Promote Computer Science and Technical Talent In Education.

Distinguished Leaders:

I am James (Jim) Mersfelder, a retired software entrepreneur, a current and past board member of several high-tech software companies, and the past President and co-founder of a software company focused on banking and financial trading software which had clients in the major banking centers of thirty-five countries located in the Americas, Europe and Asia. Over the last fifty years in this industry I have directly or indirectly hired and managed thousands of employees. Recently, I began working with a small group in support of the CS4CT initiative to expand the teaching of computer science in K-12 organized by the Connecticut Chapter of the Computer Science Teachers Association.

My personal story about computer science and computing is a little odd. As a sophomore at the Stevens Institute of Technology, an engineering school in New Jersey in 1961, I had the opportunity to work with a small team to translate a mainframe IBM Fortran compiler to run on a Univac 1001 computer. At that point I had not formal training in computing. For me learning about computing and computer languages was about writing code in machine language, running small routines and fixing errors until we had a working compiler. Learning by doing was the way I entered this field.

I became interested in the work of CS4CT initiative to bring computer science into K-12 as a result of working with a Connecticut based high tech software company which was unable to find qualified software developers within the state and had located these good jobs out of the state. The stories of other firms having similar problems caused me to seek out Code.org and to give them a grant in support of their work in Connecticut. As I followed my grant money and its impact, I discovered how limited the Connecticut State government’s commitment to supporting this effort was.
I would like to thank you for raising a bill No. 1129 that will help make computer science education a priority in Connecticut schools. I believe it will create a durable structure to address the institutional needs at the state level to provide computer science experiences to all K-12 students as well as advancing computer science learning opportunities within the Connecticut state college system.

In addition to the structure as proposed we need a commitment to fund this computer science initiative which would be available to all students, with ongoing professional development provided to teachers from high-quality trainers and curriculum providers. I strongly support the establishment of the Computer Science Commission and would recommend that the commission include a number of outside business persons working in related start-ups and established companies. The use of computer science in business is very fast moving and outside voices would be helpful. The establishment of the commission account to fund activities is important and allowing for corporate donations is a good start at funding the initiative. It is critical that there be a strong public-private partnership to make this initiative successful.

Our Connecticut students should not receive less than their counterparts in other states, and our teachers need to be equally supported in teaching it. We need funding to support computer science education and to develop an exemplary program that sets the standard for high-quality computer science education. Your bill can help to create a pipeline of students who will be the software entrepreneurs of the future and who will start businesses, hire employees and enrich our communities.

I am sorry that my schedule did not allow for me to be at your hearing in person. I would be happy to continue a discussion with you if you think it worthwhile.

Respectfully submitted,

James L. Mersfelder