Testimony Supporting

H.B. 6901: An Act Concerning A Student Loan Reimbursement Program For Certain Professionals; H.B. 6902: An Act Concerning Youth Service Bureaus and Establishment of a Juvenile Diversionary Program; and S.B. 1219: An Act Concerning Fully Funding Excess Costs for Special Education

Appropriations Committee
March 28, 2023

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representative Exum, Representative Paris, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee:

This testimony is submitted on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based advocacy organization working to ensure that Connecticut is a thriving and equitable state where all children achieve their full potential.

Connecticut Voices for Children is testifying in support of H.B. 6901: An Act Concerning A Student Loan Reimbursement Program For Certain Professionals; H.B. 6902: An Act Concerning Youth Service Bureaus and Establishment of a Juvenile Diversionary Program; and S.B. 1219: An Act Concerning Fully Funding Excess Costs for Special Education

H.B. 6901: An Act Concerning A Student Loan Reimbursement Program For Certain Professionals establishes a loan reimbursement pilot program for Connecticut residents in certain professions who graduated from a state college or university.

Connecticut’s population has stagnated over the past decade despite an increase during the pandemic. Our economy and our state’s fiscal health suffer from the loss of much-needed workers and taxpayers. HB 6901 may help increase Connecticut’s taxpayer base, and therefore, increase the revenue available to make sustained, critical investments in programs that support Connecticut’s children, families, and future.

Moreover, to qualify for this program, a participant must be employed full-time as a nurse, teacher, or in childcare, mental health, or social services; HB 6901 will incentivize students to enter these fields currently facing massive workforce shortages and encourage them to remain in Connecticut after graduation.

Many individuals want to enter these qualifying fields because they are passionate and feel a calling to do this work of serving others. However, the pay is low and educational requirements are high, making these career paths impractical at best and impossible at worst. By eliminating the high educational costs, this program could help to remove some barriers for people who feel called to the work but are currently unable to do it for practical reasons such as needing to take
time off of work to go back to school and concerns about the long-term negative impacts of taking out student loans. HB 6901 may re-capture some people who left CT’s workforce during the pandemic—particularly young and middle-aged women who overwhelmingly left due to child care and caretaking responsibilities.

Particularly, providing loan reimbursement for child care workers will help address our state’s decreasing child care workforce. Connecticut’s ECE workforce was 22 percent smaller in 2021 than in 2019. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, Connecticut’s early care and education workforce in May of 2019 comprised 16,270 workers. In May of 2021, only 12,640 people were part of the ECE workforce. Moreover, Connecticut’s number of child care workers—typically working in center-based and home-based care settings—has been cut in half between 2018 and 2022. The occupation that has suffered the most attrition within the early care and education workforce is child care workers. The number of child care workers decreased from a high of 9,490 in May of 2018 to a low of 4,810 in the first quarter of 2022.

Another driver Connecticut’s child care worker shortage is that our state’s wages for workers in the ECE field are untenably low. According to the CT Department of Labor Occupational and Wage Statistic Database, the median salary for a preschool teacher in CT in Q1 of 2022 was $31,567. This disparity is even more significant for ECE workers in home-based settings, many of whom earn far less than minimum wage once the totality of their hours and expenses are considered. Connecticut must substantially raise wages and benefits for the child care workforce, and HB 6901 is an important step toward providing additional benefits for our state’s child care workers.

We urge the committee to pass **H.B. 6901: An Act Concerning A Student Loan Reimbursement Program For Certain Professionals** which will increase Connecticut’s taxpayer base, help fill workforce shortages in critical fields, provide relief from education costs, increase revenue, and strengthen our state’s economy.

**H.B. 6902: An Act Concerning Youth Service Bureaus and Establishment of a Juvenile Diversionary Program** seeks to provide consistency in both the use of diversion and in the outcomes of diversionary services; additionally, it will provide supports to youth and families that require alternative diversionary approaches. Our testimony offers suggestions to strengthen the bill.

Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs) provide critical supports to at-risk youth and have the potential to be an even greater source of support to young people and their families. We are hopeful that increasing the availability of YSBs will provide more diversionary opportunities for youth across the state who need them. This bill would require that all municipalities with fewer than 70,000 people establish a YSB. There is recent research conducted for the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee (JJPOC) that found a correlation between the size of the population served and the ability of YSBs to meet their state mandates; the researchers suggest that this may be due to larger networks of partners and available services within larger regions. We ask the
committee consider removing the 70,000 person cap on the size of municipalities must have a YSB and also consider creating regional YSBs for smaller municipalities with appropriate levels of funding for transportation and staffing. We recommend consulting the researchers who conducted the study to identify the appropriate population of young people for regionalized YSBs.

We believe that appropriate services ought to be matched with the needs of young people and their families and that in order for this to be done, programs must have mechanisms to monitor and improve quality when young people’s needs are not being met. This bill seeks to do just this. Requiring the Department of Children and Families to establish performance standards for YSBs and submitting a biennial state-wide performance report to the JJPOC on diversion of young people under 18 creates accountability to promote better consistency use of diversion and in services. In order to strengthen this part of the bill, we suggest including ways that youth and family voices are part of identifying measuring outcomes. We also suggest including reporting on the myriad services provided by YSBs beyond diversion, such as behavioral health, employment, prosocial development, prevention, etc.

True innovation is birthed out of necessity. While new accountability measures are important, we’re pleased that the committee has created a new diversion program for young people who are committed for a first or second offense or charged with a minor offense. Regardless of where young people live, all young people deserve to be treated by the court system as deserving of opportunities to learn and grow. Codifying this expectation is an important step to ensuring our courts treat young people with fairly. That said, we do have some concerns and hope the committee will consider our suggestions for strengthening this bill.

First, we support identifying and providing services and support to children and families struggling with chronic absenteeism or truancy; we also do not oppose providing those services through programs that also offer diversionary services. However, we know that research says that mixing young people who have not committed crimes with young people who have increases risk of criminal behavior for the young people who otherwise might not commit criminal behavior. In order to ensure we’re not exacerbating any existing issues, we ask that the language be changed to clarify that young people receiving services for chronic absenteeism or truancy will not receive Judicial handling if they don’t comply, and young people receiving services for chronic absenteeism or truancy are provided services separately from young people who have higher measured risk of engaging in delinquent activities.

Second, many of the municipalities where the new “Diversion First” program would be established currently have Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs) tasked with providing diversionary screening and services, and some of these JRBs are highly effective programs. For example, as part of its youth service array, RYASAP in Bridgeport has a mediation program where 85 percent of young people who participate in mediation do not re-offend. In 2022, Dillinger Research & Applied Data surveyed Connecticut’s YSBs and JRBs regarding capacity and compliance with state mandates; we suggest conducting a deeper examination of these data to build a better understanding of the practices and services utilized by well-functioning JRBs. We believe that doing so will ensure the State’s ability to build upon what’s working and replace what isn’t.
Lastly, we hope that the committee will include language that includes key school district staff, municipal youth program staff, and programs that have already completed service scans (e.g. Untied Ways, CHDI) in creating plans to eliminate service gaps so that the plans are as robust as possible and leverage knowledge that already exists. We also suggest clarifying language that requires police departments to refer young people who are charged with a crime but have not been adjudicated by the courts to the “Diversion First” program, and if the program screens the young people and determines that they are not a good fit for the program, we hope that the program will refer the young person back to the police department.

As a child advocacy organization, we support this bill’s intent to identify service gaps and fill those gaps. While the problems that exist are much more pervasive than what the YSBs and diversionary programs can fix on their own, we applaud the committee’s attempt to ensure equity of opportunity for youth and families, which is why we urge the committee to pass H.B. 6902: An Act Concerning Youth Service Bureaus and Establishment of a Juvenile Diversionary Program.

S.B. 1219: An Act Concerning Fully Funding Excess Costs for Special Education will require a study of funding needed to fully cover excess costs for special education.

A district’s enrollment of students with special education needs changes year to year. While districts can budget for changes in special education service funding to a certain extent, changes above what they predict can spend districts spiraling into budget crises. Over the last fifteen years, the Excess Cost Grant, Connecticut’s fund for supporting districts in paying for special education students with very expensive needs and students with no identifiable home district, has covered a reduced share of district claims. Worse still, this aid is distributed inequitably. The state’s wealthiest districts receive many times more Excess Cost Grant funding than those with the lowest community wealth. We, at CT Voices, have previously researched and written about these challenges in a published report as well as in testimony last year.10 11

Since 2010, Connecticut’s enrollment of children and youth with special education needs has grown by 32.1 percent, the second-largest percent growth in the country.12 Unfortunately, Connecticut’s Excess Cost Grant cap has not adjusted accordingly. State contributions to the Excess Cost Grant have decreased slightly since 2008 when they were more than $150 million. Hence, the difference between what districts request in Excess Cost Grant funding and what they receive in Excess Cost Grant funding is an ever-widening gap. Consequently, the reimbursement rate has dropped steadily over recent years, from 100 percent in 2008 to 68 percent in 2022.13

An analysis of Excess Cost Grant reimbursements between 2014 and 2016 based on District Reference Groups (DRGs) revealed significant disparities in the allocation of these dollars. For example, over the three years, DRG A, a grouping of the wealthiest districts, received an average of eight times more per pupil Excess Cost Grant funding than districts from DRG I, a grouping of the most under-resourced districts. DRG I has 66 percent students of color compared to only 12 percent in DRG A. Residents in DRG A have an average household income four times greater than residents in DRG I. Therefore, the Excess Cost Grant funding disparity disproportionately impacts Connecticut’s students of color and students living in poverty.14
• **The Education Cost Sharing Grant (ECS) is the primary State source funding special education services.** This funding formula is based on Connecticut’s overall declining student enrollment. Connecticut’s overall student enrollment decreased by 47,000 students between 2007 and 2019, a more than eight percent decline. Meanwhile, Connecticut’s enrollment of students needing special education services grew by nearly 16,000 students between 2007 and 2019—an enrollment increase of 23 percent. This means that special education funding provided by ECS is increasingly insufficient for Connecticut’s population of students with special education needs.

• **Special education funding through the ECS is declining.** Special education funding through the ECS fell by $54 million between 2014 and 2017. Meanwhile, statewide special education costs increased by more than $472 million in inflation-adjusted dollars during that period.

• **Connecticut’s population of students who need special education services is increasing.** Between 2019 and 2019, Connecticut experienced a 74 percent increase in students identified within the “Autism” disability category, a 42 percent increase in students identified within the “Other Health Impairment” disability category, and a 37 percent increase in students identified as having a “Specific Learning Disability.”

• **Excess Cost Grant requests are growing while Excess Cost Grant funding is shrinking.** Between 2008 and 2019, district requests for funding through the Excess Cost Grant increased from $154 million to $205 million in inflation-adjusted dollars. However, State allocations fell from $154 million to $148 million. Consequently, the rate of reimbursement decreased from 100 percent to 72 percent. Since then, the Excess Cost Grant allocation has fallen further to $141 million.

• **Special education expenditures are more volatile than general education expenditures.** Across all districts from 2007 to 2016, general education expenditures fluctuated about three percent each year, while special education expenditures fluctuated about six percent. In Connecticut’s 54 districts with fewer than 1,000 students, the average annual percent change was eight percent.

• **The budgetary strain of districts’ increasing special education costs has coincided with a decline in the academic performance of students receiving special education services relative to their peers in the general education setting.** Between 2014 and 2018, the achievement gap between students receiving special education services and students in the general education setting increased by 0.8 points in language arts and three points in math. In districts with above-average concentrations of students experiencing poverty, the achievement gap between students receiving special education services and students in the general education population grew by even more: 1.4 points in language arts and 3.9 points in math.

• **Students who need special education services fell even further behind during the pandemic.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, a greater percentage of students needing special education services than general education peers followed a remote-only learning model. Students in the remote-only learning model demonstrated 19 percent lower on-track rates than students with some in-person learning.

• **Read our 2021 report and 2022 testimony for more details.**
While we, at CT Voices, have studied the Excess Cost Grant, a State study may provide stakeholders a better understanding of the depth of the funding challenges, which is why we do not oppose **S.B. 1219: An Act Concerning Fully Funding Excess Costs for Special Education.**

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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1 Connecticut Voices for Children calculations utilizing data retrieved from: https://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm
2 Data for Q1 2022 retrieved from: https://www1.ctdol.state.ct.us/lmi/wages/default.asp
3 Ibid.