

**Testimony of Wendy Lecker
Education Cost Sharing Task Force
July 12, 2012**

Members of the ECS Task Force:

Thank you for allowing me to present my remarks.

I am a public school parent in Stamford and a graduate of Woodbridge public schools. I am also a former staff attorney with the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, which brought a successful school funding lawsuit against New York State, and I have researched state school funding formulas as a consultant for the Rural Schools and Community Trust. Therefore, I am familiar with school funding formulas and funding reform.

Whether states engage in funding reform as a result of a court order or whether done independently by the legislature, they start with an analysis of the cost of education performed by a nationally recognized expert.

Evidence across the Nation

In Maryland, school funding reform started with the experts. The bi-partisan Thornton Commission studied Maryland's funding formula, compared it with funding formulas nationwide and held public hearings. It then commissioned a cost study by a nationally recognized firm and also accepted the results of another cost study commissioned by an advocacy group. Relying on these cost studies, the Commission issued recommendations for a reformed school funding system, truncating a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of its school funding system.

In Wyoming, the state hired consultants to gather information from educators across the state to identify the basic building blocks of an adequate education and, then to cost out those components.

New York, Massachusetts, Kansas, New Mexico, the list goes on and on.

These and many other states reformed their school funding systems using design principles developed with the guidance of experts who researched the cost of delivering quality education in their states. They looked to educators to develop the components of an adequate education, then employed nationally recognized school finance experts to assess the cost of those components, adjusting the cost to account for student needs (such as the existence and concentration of poverty, English Language Learning, disabilities), community wealth and geographic variables that impact the cost of education.

The obvious lesson: when aiming to reform or design school a funding formula, start with school funding experts.

As you must know, the ECS formula is not inherently inequitable. Like many other states, the formula provides a foundation amount, which it adjusts for student need and town wealth. But the basic and obvious problems are that the foundation is not connected to the real cost of education, the student need adjustments are not connected to the real cost of adequately serving those students and do not even include students with disabilities, and the measure of town wealth is skewed.

These are all pivotal school funding issues on which school finance experts can provide guidance.

The Need for an Educational Adequacy Cost Study

I was encouraged to hear your Formula Subcommittee recognize the need to conduct a cost study, using accepted methodology and recognized experts. I also appreciate Mr. Miller's comments that we need to have an honest discussion about the cost of education in Connecticut and how to go about paying for an adequate education for all. One cannot begin to refashion the formula without understanding the cost of education and the variables that affect education's cost in Connecticut. This should be the starting point of this Task Force- I am glad that you have arrived there. Any cost study must also involve the CCJEF plaintiffs.

I have also heard testimony at previous Task Force meetings advocating untested weights for needy children, such as a proposed "student success factor" which would ignore weights for English Language Learners, weights for children with disabilities and would discount the severity and concentration of poverty. The effect of such a weight would be to leave quite a few districts without adequate resources to provide services for their English Language Learners or students with disabilities. I would hope that rather than listen to those not recognized as school finance experts opine on funding formulas that may serve their interests but do not serve the wide range of students we have in Connecticut, you will instead engage qualified experts who will be able to help us all understand how to meet the needs of all of Connecticut's children.

The Connection between Resources and Achievement

Inadequate state funding has devastating consequences for our children, especially our most vulnerable children.

It has been proven in case after case across this nation that there is a direct connection between the resource gap and the achievement gap.

The court in the recent Colorado school funding case concluded "Studies performed throughout the United States, in states ranging from Massachusetts to South Carolina to California, demonstrate a strong relationship between resources and achievement. While expenditures in general make a difference, they make an even bigger difference if you spend them in areas close to instruction," such as on teaching. Expenditures make a difference when they are spent on the basic tools necessary to learn.

Basic Building Blocks of and Adequate Education

When one looks at school funding reform across this nation, there is a remarkable consensus on what those basic building blocks of an adequate education are. Despite demographic, geographic and economic differences educators, experts and community members across the United States agree on the fundamental resources needed in order to provide every child with a sound, quality education. In fact, in the Kansas school funding case, the court remarked that, on the issue of necessary resources, educators “spoke almost with one voice.”

Some of these resources are:

High quality pre-k

An adequate number of teachers, adequately trained

Small class size in k-3

Extra services for at-risk children

A challenging curriculum that includes art, gym, world languages and music

Adequate light, space and well-maintained facilities

Adequate books, computers, pencils and other instrumentalities of learning

Expanded learning/enrichment opportunities

A wide range of extra-curricular activities

Wraparound services for at-risk children

Some of these inputs were listed in the Horton v. Meskill decision, but as the Connecticut Supreme Court recently noted educational inputs will change over time because the meaning of a “constitutionally adequate public education is not a static concept removed from the demands of an evolving world.”

It is inexcusable that schools in Connecticut, one of the richest states, cannot afford to pay for substitutes, art classes, light bulbs, copy paper and textbooks, let alone social workers, AP courses, preschool, services for English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and more.

It is also inexcusable to punish our students and teachers in places like Bridgeport and New London for failing to meet mandated academic targets without first ensuring that all our students and teachers have these basic tools to learn.

School Finance Reform Matters

Not only does money spent on educational resources make a difference in achievement, but the evidence shows that school finance reform improves educational outcomes. In Michigan, Kansas, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Maryland, for example, school funding reforms that pumped additional money into schools in those states resulted in significant improvement in student achievement.

<http://docushare.msde.state.md.us/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-18046> ,

http://www.shankerinstitute.org/images/doesmoneymatter_final.pdf ,

<http://schottfoundation.org/publications/schott-2010-black-male-report.pdf>

Cost of an Adequate Education and Our Economy

There is one more point that courts in school funding cases have made clear: a state's perception of what it can and wants to pay is of little consequence. I have heard much discussion about our difficult economy and tight budgets. I do not discount this reality.

However, courts across this country, despite this difficult economy have recently found states to be underfunding their schools to the tune of billions of dollars. Recent examples include the decisions in Colorado and Washington State earlier this year, and New York's Court of Appeals allowing the Hussein small cities school funding case to proceed earlier this summer.

If we as a state persist in sticking our head in the sand about the need to fund our schools adequately, we can be assured that a court will yank it out and force us to face the fact that Mr. Miller recognized. We may think we cannot afford to educate our children in this economy. The reality is we cannot afford not to.

However if we wait until a court tells us to fund our schools adequately and equitably, we will waste millions of dollars on litigation and waste precious years in the lives and education of our children. My hope is that this task force will recommend a comprehensive education adequacy study, or updating of CCJEF's 2005 cost study, working with the CCJEF plaintiffs, so that we can begin to finally reform our broken and inadequate system of funding our public schools.

Accounting for proper school spending

I would like to address Secretary Barnes' question from the last task force meeting. He asked essentially, if the state adequately funds schools and districts, how will the state ensure that the money isn't misspent?

Most of our districts are lucky to have a democratically elected board of education, which answers to the public. And the school budget, as Mr. Barnes knows from his experience in Stamford, is the most scrutinized budget in a municipality. Because of the democratic process, the budget is a matter of public record, showing exactly how the money is spent. What little resources schools get is spent on what they need. Teachers, administrators and parents, those in our schools every day, know exactly what we resources we do not have and what we need. Moreover, schools and students suffer through more accountability than anyone. Where is any evidence of an epidemic of schools misspending money?

The schools are not the bad actors here- it is the state that has repeatedly refused to provide adequate resources for our public schools. So, I respectfully submit, that before we start worrying about an imaginary need to stem misspending by schools, we focus our attention on those who have thus far escaped accountability for shirking their constitutional duties. Let's make sure the state, once and for all, and for the first time in Connecticut's history, figures out how much money it will take to provide every child with a quality education and then figures out how to fulfill its constitutional duty. The rest, as they say, is commentary.

CAPSS' plan to transform schools

During the last task force meeting, CAPSS's executive director set forth CAPSS' plan for "transforming" education in Connecticut. Since Mr. Cirasuolo raised this topic, I feel the need to address it. Mr. Cirasuolo presented the idea of "personalized education," where students are grouped based on "progress" rather than age, and move to new content levels, at their own speed, according to their own personal needs and preferences. He painted a picture of schools where students more or less learn independently; a

“school of one.” Mr. Cirusuolo admitted, when asked, that there is no evidence showing that this type of learning is successful.

This plan is troubling on many levels. First, grouping by “progress” rather than age flies in the face of the State Board of Education’s resolution against tracking. As you must know, Stamford has had a tracking system in our middle schools that has deprived children of color and poor children of educational opportunities in high school and beyond for forty years. As awful and discriminatory as this system was (we are trying to dismantle it), at least children who were grouped based on “progress” were allowed to learn with their age peers. CAPSS’s plan would have children who do not show progress suffer the indignity of having to learn with children much younger than them (and given the current demographics of our achievement gap, who do you think those children would be?). Imagine what that system would do to a student’s sense of self and desire to continue learning. A 12 year old learning with a 7 year old?

Moreover, Mr. Cirusuolo contended that a teacher in front of 20 students cannot possibly discern each student’s learning style and need. I vehemently disagree. Teachers, for time immemorial, have been observing students in classrooms and adjusting learning to their needs. They know their students and their classroom dynamics, and how to use those dynamics to foster learning. As long as we do not force teachers to follow a script, they will continue to be able to know their students keep the classroom a dynamic learning environment. Certainly class size needs to be reasonable (and small in the early grades). However, to claim that a teacher now cannot do what has been part of a teacher’s job forever is devoid of logic.

CAPSS’ proposal to have children learn independently also destroys the basic aim of public education. Public education is not only about learning “content,” mastering content and moving to the next level of content. Public education’s main aim is to develop responsible and tolerant citizens. Having children of the same age (and developmental level) sit and learn together enables them to develop the idea of community. They learn from each other, they translate classroom dynamics into the dynamics of the outside world, they learn to collaborate- in short they learn all the skills necessary to succeed in a democratic society. Given the state of our democracy and the political intransigence that is plaguing our country, these lessons are sorely needed and in no way should be thrown out in favor of some unproven school structure that promises efficient delivery of content (most likely by parking children in front of computers to be lectured at online). That is not what school is about.

Conclusion

You may have read or heard some of this testimony before. I have appeared in front of Governor Rell’s Education Commission in 2005, the Legislature’s Education Committee when it toured in 2005, the State Board of Education and have submitted testimony to the Education and Appropriation Committees of the legislature; each time asking for real and comprehensive school funding reform based on the true cost of education. We parents, citizens and taxpayers understand the urgency of school funding reform and, for years, have been trying to make our representatives and state officials feel that same urgency. It is discouraging to see the state focus repeatedly on many “reforms” that will have so little positive impact on our children, while essentially ignoring the one systemic reform proven to improve education for all children: adequate and equitable school funding. I appreciate the time your task force has taken to examine this vitally important issue and hope that you can communicate the urgency of meaningful school funding reform to your colleagues in state government.

Thank you.

Respectfully Submitted,

Wendy Lecker
98 Larkspur Road
Stamford, CT 06903