

TESTIMONY OF THE

**CONNECTICUT COALITION
FOR *JUSTICE*
IN EDUCATION FUNDING**

TO THE

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

March 3, 2006

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates the opportunity to submit written testimony on the following bills of interest to our membership:

SB 47 – An Act Implementing the Governor’s Budget Recommendations Regarding Education

At a time in which many school districts are struggling to sustain even maintenance budgets because of the heavy burden on their towns’ property tax rates, the Governor has proposed just a 1.3 percent (\$26 million) increase in education aid to cities and towns. That includes an increase of only \$7 million (0.4 percent) for the Education Cost Sharing grant, plus a mere 2 percent increase for the special education excess cost grant, elimination of the special education equity grant, no increases in pupil transportation or adult education, and no effort whatsoever to eliminate the disequalizing 11-year cap on ECS formula aid.

The Governor’s proposed budget stands in stark contrast to the findings of the education adequacy cost study that CCJEF commissioned in spring 2005. That study, conducted by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, a nationally prominent school finance firm based in Denver, estimated that for Connecticut’s public school students to meet the relatively modest 2007-08 Adequate Yearly Progress goals of No Child Left Behind, an additional investment of some \$481 million (in 2003 dollars) would need to be made across 92 school districts to strengthen curriculum and instruction, improve pupil support services, supplement books and materials, enhance technology, strategically boost intervention/remediation programs, etc. For 95 percent of students to perform at state goal level (to reach full adequacy), that estimated investment was \$2 billion more per year across some 145 school districts. While policy studies such as this do not generate precise numbers, they do approximate the real costs of meeting state and federal mandates, performance standards, and to some extent also community expectations for their local schools. Adding to consternation over the state’s underfunding of education is the State Department of Education’s recent presentation to the Governor’s ECS task force, during which it was noted that for the state to reach its 50 percent share of funding in education, it would today have to invest another \$1.1 billion, inasmuch as this year the state’s share is expected to be just over 40 percent. The cost study figures would place a 50 percent

share of net current expenditures alone at \$1 billion, but these differences are very small when compared with the new resources being proposed in the Governor's budget.

SB 47 will not contribute in any meaningful way toward the goal of adequately and equitably funding the schools. It will do far too little to help teachers and school administrators in their struggle to close the achievement gaps that we all acknowledge to be unconscionable in this the wealthiest state in the nation. It will also not contribute significantly toward the goals of adequately preparing all our students to successfully compete in the global marketplace, to continue their education without the need for costly and time-consuming remediation in our colleges and universities, and to be well equipped for roles as future community leaders, informed citizens, and responsible parents.

For these reasons, we will comment only briefly on a few aspects of SB 47:

- The targeting of \$3,483,000 from priority school districts' school readiness appropriation for the seven ERG I school districts is appreciated, but small given the extraordinary challenges those urban districts face.
- CCJEF opposes the proposed expansion of seats for charter schools (Sec. 3(c)), not because we fail to value the contribution of charter schools within the context of expanded choice for students and their parents, but solely due to fiscal concerns: i.e., the state cannot muster the political will to fund adequately the 166 public school districts and interdistrict magnets it already has in place nor to fully fund its numerous categorical grant programs so that all districts might equally benefit. Practically speaking, there is no room for a shadow system unless and until the primary system of preK-12 public schools are fully funded in accordance with the principles of education adequacy and equity.
- With reference to the interdistrict magnet school provisions (Sec. 4), CCJEF would like to inform the Committee that an adequacy cost study of the magnet schools (both interdistrict and host models) is underway by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates and should be completed by early April. CCJEF will be pleased to discuss that research with the Committee and to share findings once they become available. From preliminary evidence, it is clear that the estimated cost of education adequacy for the magnets substantially exceeds the figures contained in the Governor's proposal.
- The special education excess cost threshold (Sec. 6(b)) of four and one-half times the average per pupil costs remains a huge fiscal burden to school districts. Nationally, excess cost reimbursement policies vary from 100 percent (Mississippi, at least prior to Hurricane Katrina) to zero, and some states use a dollar threshold (e.g., in Michigan it is \$40,000 per child, after which the state pays 100 percent of the child's expenses). Surely a markedly lower threshold, such as three times the regular pupil cost, would do much to alleviate the pain within local school district budgets — particularly if the Governor's recommendation to eliminate the excess cost equity grant is to prevail. Moreover, the cap on special education excess costs should be dropped (and the same goes for the caps on pupil transportation and adult education).

- The Governor’s proposed 2 percent increase in the special education excess cost grant and the proposed elimination of the special education equity grant (Sec. (deleted c)) are causes for alarm; both grants have been capped in past years. Since 2002-03, there has been a 2 percent decline in the state’s share of special education costs, which amounts to just over 30 percent. But the declining share has come at a time at which total special education expenditures are soaring. For example, between 2001-02 and 2003-04 (the last 2-year period for which the State Department of Education has published relevant data), special education expenditures grew by 38 percent (including local, state, and federal dollars). CCJEF urges the Committee to press the Legislature to allocate sufficient funds for the special education excess cost grant to enable a lowering of its threshold and removal of its funding cap, as well as restoration and full funding of the special education equity cap.

RB 376 – An Act Concerning Full-Day Kindergarten

CCJEF strongly supports the awarding of one-time grants to priority school districts for the purposes of establishing full-day kindergarten programs. It is assumed that appropriate uses of the funds include both operating and capital expenditures, inasmuch as both cost areas have been major obstacles in transitioning from half-day kindergarten to the full-day programs.

Given the importance of early childhood education and the well-documented enduring benefits that accrue to children, families, and society through investments in high-quality early learning programs, CCJEF urges that the Legislature help make full-day kindergarten programs affordable not only for all the priority school districts, but also for every Connecticut community.

The June 2005 education adequacy cost study conducted by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates included estimates of full-day kindergarten costs. The 44 highly qualified educators from across the state who participated in the study’s professional judgment panels unanimously agreed that kindergarten should be a full-time program within every Connecticut school district. CCJEF agrees with these distinguished educators and suggests that expanding and funding Raised Bill 376 significantly beyond the priority schools would be a highly cost-effective use for “Rainy Day” funds.

S.B. 380 – An Act Concerning Special Education

This bill is understood to bring the State of Connecticut into further compliance with the December 2004 Reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Portions of RB 380 will increase school administrative costs for special education, and the provision in Sec. 4(d)(1)(C), which may make it easier for parents to enroll their children in private settings without prior consent or referral by the district, could drive out-of-district placement costs up significantly.

CCJEF would be remiss not to express the distress of our members at the continual underfunding of IDEA by the federal government. While Congress committed to providing 40 percent of the additional costs for educating students needing special education services when it approved IDEA in

1975, today the federal government funds just 17.8 percent. And just like its newer cousin, the No Child Left Behind Act, IDEA imposes heavy and costly mandates on our schools.

Nevertheless, just as with NCLB, the federal government's failure to adequately fund IDEA doesn't abrogate the state's responsibility to fund that program's mandates that it has passed down to the public schools.

RB 381 — An Act Concerning Healthy Food and Beverages in the Schools

CCJEF members recognize the importance of finding policy levers to reinforce sound nutritional standards and help combat childhood obesity. Although we believe that matters pertaining to the sale of beverages and snacks should be left to the control of local boards of education, we appreciate that RB 381 affords optional compliance levels and may also prove to be revenue neutral for school districts, thanks in part to the 10-cent incentive.

RB 407 — An Act Concerning Reading Programs for Priority School District Students

CCJEF agrees with the importance of priority school districts implementing personal reading plans for students who are substantially deficient in reading and for providing them with additional instruction, such as tutoring or after-school, school vacation, weekend, or summer reading programs. These are the kinds of interventions that every school district ought to be able to afford to employ and to which every slow, challenged, or otherwise under-performing reader should have ready access.

While it makes good educational sense to focus first on grades 1-3, and then on those students in grades 4-6 who have failed to make progress, the reading performance of 8th and 10th graders on the CMT and CAPT assessments, respectively, clearly indicate that continuing interventions should be undertaken throughout the upper grades — all, of course, “within available appropriations” (as per Sec. 1(c)). Unfortunately, effective remediation of reading difficulties is not easy, and it is costly.

Again, we point to the education adequacy cost study, whose figures for all districts include these and other critical reading (and math) interventions for students at all grade levels. The outstanding Connecticut educators who participated in the professional judgment panels were determined that every child should have as many opportunities as necessary to master this gateway skill.

RB 5517 — An Act Concerning Universal Preschool

CCJEF lauds the intent to offer equal educational opportunity for all 3- and 4-year-old children to attend high-quality preschool programs. Indeed, we believe that such universal access is essential to providing every child with an adequate education in the state of Connecticut. However, we find many troubling aspects to this premature bill.

First and foremost, this would impose a very sizeable unfunded mandate on school districts and their towns. The Raised Bill 5517 makes no reference to what the state's contribution to the local costs of universal preschool would be, either in terms of supporting the substantial operating costs of such

programs or meeting the extensive capital needs for additional classroom space. What percent of costs will the state assume? Will only low-income children be eligible for state subsidized slots? Will only priority school districts be eligible for the state subsidies? Will the costs of universal preschool be incorporated into the revamped ECS formula, or will they remain subject to less predictable categorical funding streams like school readiness programs?

Second, the bill seemingly implies that the public schools and other town departments will operate programs sufficient to accommodate all 3- and 4-year-olds, rather than to offer programs in conjunction with the existing blend of private programs operated by faith-based and other nonprofit organizations and for-profit entities. Capacity-wise, in most communities a blend of program providers will be required if all children are to be accommodated. Will children attending non-public programs also benefit from state subsidized slots and enjoy programming that meets the Department of Education's preschool standards?

Third, while acknowledging that one-size-fits-all educational programs are rarely a good idea, we nevertheless express concern about the benefits of any program that would meet for only 2.5 hours per day and whose quality standards would not also extend to wrap-around child care services. Many other important issues — including safety, pupil transportation, salaries and benefits, and ensuring an ample supply of qualified staff — must also be addressed before a sweeping policy such as the one presented in this bill is ready to move forward. Presumably the Early Childhood Advisory Cabinet will be able to make rapid progress over the next several months in fine-tuning this important initiative.

Educators participating in the adequacy cost study's professional judgment panels unanimously agreed that universal preschool is an essential element of education adequacy. They specified the resources necessary for implementing such a program in districts across the state, and the cost of those resources is included in the district and statewide "targeted (full) adequacy" cost figures.

CCJEF asks the Committee to take no action on Raised Bill 5515.

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Should you have any questions, please contact Steve Cassano at (860) 478-5535 or Dianne Kaplan deVries at (860) 461-0320.

CCJEF is a broad-based coalition of municipalities, local boards of education, statewide professional education associations, unions, and other pro-education advocacy organizations, parents, and individuals. The growing membership already includes towns that are home to 1.2 million residents (approximately 35 percent of the state's population). Member school districts serve 209,000 students, including more than two-thirds of Connecticut's minority students, those from low-income homes, and students from homes where English is not the primary language.