

Testimony Opposing Reduced Appropriations for the Department of Education

H.B. 5044: An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2017

Rachel Leventhal-Weiner, Ph.D.

Appropriations Committee

February 16, 2016

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Rachel Leventhal-Weiner and I am the Education Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

At Connecticut Voices for Children, it is our fundamental belief that *all* children, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, physical ability, or geography, should be assured of a meaningful opportunity to achieve their full potential. The quality of the publicly funded education that children receive is deeply connected to their later life opportunities, their pursuit of post-secondary education and eventual employment and engagement in civic life.

Because of our belief that access to equitable educational experiences is necessary to enable opportunities for all of Connecticut's children, we are here today to oppose the Governor's proposed budget that reduces State Department of Education (SDE) spending by \$69 million. The total cut is the result of a 5.75 percent reduction in several line items, as well as the elimination of nine other programs. In accordance with the Governor's budgeting strategy, over thirty programs are combined into one line item, Agency Operations, to grant greater discretion to the SDE. Several components of the Agency Operations line item were subject to an additional reduction above the 5.75 percent cut.

We are here to oppose the proposed budget cuts and in particular, we share three specific concerns:

1. Reductions in spending for statutory grant programs, including the Education Cost Sharing Grant and the Excess Cost Grant, leave local school districts and municipalities with untenable decisions to make about schooling. The Governor's budget makes a 0.5 percent cut (\$11.5 million) to the Education Equalization Grant (EEG) line item that funds Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grants to towns. While the Governor has insisted that he has preserved ECS funding, the "small" cut has two serious consequences. First, ECS funding has been capped for the last two years, so without further appropriation for public school funding, these caps represent an effective cut in school funding for local districts. Second, many districts receive less than 50 percent of their ECS entitlement. The cap on ECS funding coupled with a further 0.53% cut leaves many districts in dire financial straits.

Additionally, the Governor's proposed budget cuts the Excess Cost Grant, the program reimbursing local districts for exceptionally high special education costs, by 5.75% or \$8 million. Last year, the Governor capped these grants, essentially passing budget cuts on to local taxpayers. This means in the last two years, the state share of special education funding has been evaporating, leaving local districts responsible for making up the difference with no choice but to pass cuts on to taxpayers.

2. Reduction in spending and elimination of programs designed to support lowest performing schools does not equalize opportunities for students. As a state we have invested considerable resources in efforts to support our lowest performing school districts. The Governor's proposed cuts limit the state's ability to continue this important work. Specifically, the block grant budgeting strategy for the SDE budget means that over thirty programs have been combined to create the "Agency Operations" line item. The Agency Operations line item totals over \$360 million and includes funding for the Commissioner's Network, the K-3 Reading Assessment Pilot, and Family Resource Centers. Many of the cuts to these programs are not directly evident considering the consolidation of line items into the Agency Operations for the Department of Education, leaving the supplemental support and services offered to teachers, students and their families in serious jeopardy. In addition to these cuts, the Governor's Budget eliminates funding for several local programs that increase opportunity for high achieving, low-income students including the Connecticut Pre-Engineering Program, Wraparound Services, Neighborhood Youth Centers, and Bridges to Success.

3. Proposed reductions reduce the quality of choice for parents and students across the state. In addition to improving lowest performing districts across the state, we have invested considerably in expanding access to quality school choices over the last five years. The Governor's proposed budget impacts the quality of school choices for students across the state in two ways. First, the block grant budgeting strategy lumps funding for the entire Connecticut Technical High School System and the Vocational Agriculture program with over thirty programs before subjecting the consolidated programs to a 5.75% reduction. The consequences of these cuts are unclear because they are left to the discretion of the agency, and future budget adjustments to these accounts will be difficult to discern. Secondly, in addition to the cuts in the Agency Operations budget, several programs not consolidated were also subject to cuts. Notable among these reductions is the Open Choice Program which was cut by 6.84% (\$2.96 million). The Open Choice Program allows children to attend school in another community where there are available slots, serving students in Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport. This cut undoubtedly limits the ability of children and families to exit their local school district if they choose.

We believe that the investments in public education, including grants to municipalities to equalize opportunities and to enhance the quality of school choices, will be undone if the Governor's proposed budget is adopted. We urge the legislature to reconsider both the block granting budgeting strategy and many of the cuts to funding that will reduce the quality of the public education that we provide our state's children.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding the Governor's Proposed Budget for the Department of Education.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or need additional information.

Rachel Leventhal-Weiner, Ph.D.

rglweiner@ctvoices.org

(203) 498-4240 x120