

**TESTIMONY OF**

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Project Director**

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

**BEFORE THE**

**EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**Regional Information Meeting  
Hartford Learning Corridor**

**March 7, 2006**

My name is Dianne Kaplan deVries, and I serve as Project Director for the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding.

I thank you for this opportunity to come before you this evening and welcome your efforts to reach out and hear community concerns related to the ECS and the state's system of school funding. So much to say, so little time.

So let me quickly get to a few key points about what would be most welcome in terms of education funding this legislative session.

At a time in which a majority of Connecticut school districts are struggling to sustain even maintenance budgets because of the heavy burden on their towns' property tax rates, the Governor has proposed what amounts to little more than flat funding for education aid to cities and towns. Her proposed budget will not contribute in any meaningful way toward the goal of adequately and equitably funding the public 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 their roles as future community leaders, informed citizens, and responsible parents.

CCJEF asks that members of this esteemed body, the Education Committee, use their power to influence legislative colleagues across the aisles and with the Governor to:

- Dramatically increase appropriations this year in early childhood, well beyond the Governor's proposed 500 preschool slots. Moreover, the time is long overdue for making full-day kindergarten compulsory in all school districts and supporting that mandate with generous funding to support operating and capital costs over a 2 or 3-year phase-in period.
- Reduce the special education excess cost threshold to three times the per pupil expenditure of a regular program student, and fully fund that grant.
- Restore the special education excess cost equity grant, and fully fund it. In 1996 that grant was funded at the \$11.5 million per year level to assist 57 towns (large, small, urban, rural, wealthy, or poor) that incurred extraordinary expenditures due to incidences of very high-needs special education students. But in 2002, funding was reduced to \$8.5 million, though it was stretched to include grants to 78 towns. Since 2003, no funding has been made available, despite escalating special education burdens on school districts.
- Invest more substantially in the English-language acquisition of new immigrant children. Public school enrollment of English-language learners has grown by more than one-third over the past few years — from 20,500 in 2004, to some 28,000 in 2004. Hartford and the other ERG I school districts, as well as many of those in ERG H (e.g., East Hartford, Meriden, Danbury, Stamford, and Norwalk, to name only the larger ones) are especially impacted by these wonderful new students who enrich our communities greatly and who come to America with high aspirations for a good life and a secure economic future. However, they bring to our classroom substantial learning deficits, not only in terms of English language acquisition, but also in terms of acculturation, socialization skills, and other learning readiness skills, whatever their chronological ages. Many of these students, including those of high school age, come to us with little or no previous formal schooling.

Moreover, it is not just new immigrants who urgently require additional resources to surmount literacy obstacles that hinder learning in all academic areas. Indeed, thousands of Connecticut-born children who reside in homes and neighborhoods where little or no English is spoken are also in need of intensive language interventions for which adequate funding is simply not available. In Hartford, for example, about half the student population lives in households where English is not the primary language.

- Increase funding for pupil transportation, and fully fund the grant. Gasoline costs alone should make this need for a funding increase obvious. Less obvious may be the extent to which bus transportation costs hold captive the school curriculum. E.g., a late bus for a magnet school here in Hartford to accommodate late-afternoon performance arts practices costs over \$70,000. The high cost of late buses restricts the ability of all schools to offer after-school programming, such as independent study or advanced courses, remediation for all who need it, sports, music, theater, and other such offerings that help build strong minds and bodies and make school more

meaningful for students. Rural communities suffer from these constraints just as greatly as larger urban districts. The cap on public school transportation has resulted in a total allocation decline of \$1.1 million since 2000, and the Governor has not proposed increasing it for 2007. In 1990, pupil transportation was funded at \$30.8 million; in 2005, it was \$42.7 million, which in inflation-adjusted terms is over \$5 million less than 15 years ago.

- Increase funding for adult education, and fully fund the grant. In 1990, every town received an adult education grant. Today, only 21 towns receive this funding, and the allocations are capped. In 2000, adult education was funded at \$2.6 million, and then in 2001 at \$3.7 million. Thereafter, funding was cut back to just \$2.4 million in 2005, despite a clear understanding of the relationship between parental education and children's academic attainment and Connecticut's growing population of non-native speakers of English.
- ECS cap relief! What happened to the phase out? The oft-promised, set-into-statute phase-out of the ECS cap has yet to materialize beyond the one-time, 2004-05 23.27% phase-in of the difference between towns' 2003-04 capped grant and their 2004-05 target aid plus density. Eliminating the disequalizing 11-year cap on ECS formula aid need not wait for an updated/revamped school finance system.

Clearly there are other important education needs, such as those addressed in our March 3 written testimony, including increased funding of interdistrict magnet schools to better ensure the success of these valuable programs that help diminish the effects of economic and racial isolation.

CCJEF calls upon the Education Committee to summon Augenblick, Palaich and Associates for an in-depth briefing of their study and to tap their expertise with reference to attempts by other states to modernize their school funding systems and identify alternative, more equitable revenue streams outside the local property tax mechanism.

In the meantime, CCJEF will continue to talk with legislators and the Rell Administration and participate in the Governor's ECS Task Force as we seek adequate and equitable solutions outside the courtroom. As we often say, our preference is to expend our time, effort, and money in classrooms, not in courtrooms. On that same note, rather than waste taxpayers' money defending against this lawsuit, CCJEF suggests that this Committee and the legislature as a whole should advise the Attorney General not to waste the state's precious resources on fighting the basic claims of *CCJEF v Rell*, particularly inasmuch as nearly everyone in this state agrees that the present funding system is broken and outdated. Rather, the Attorney General and our counsel should ask the judge to proceed straight to the remedial phase.

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