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Testimony for Appropriations Committee Public Hearing March 27, 2015

Written Testimony for HB 6826-An Act Revising the Requirements for the Governor's Budget Recommendations and HJ 19 Resolution Requiring a Two-Thirds Vote to Approve Mandates to Municipalities and School Districts

The Connecticut Association of School Business Officials (CASBO) is a non-profit professional association that represents school business officials (SBOs) throughout the state of Connecticut. SBOs work closely with school boards, administrators, staff, public officials and communities; and are responsible for most aspects of school business and operations. This includes, but not limited to, developing and monitoring school district budgets. CASBO appreciates the financial support for public education provided by the Governor and the legislature over the past years.

We do offer the following comments with respect HB 6826

ECS Grant

The Governor's proposed budget keeps the ECS grant flat for 15-16 and 16-17. Although the grant was increased over the past two years, the vast majority of these increases in both years were targeted to the Alliance Districts. CASBO is grateful for the support of these 30 schools. However, it is important to note that for the non-alliance districts there has been little or no increase in ECS for the past 5 years. The Governor's proposal to flat fund ECS for two more years would now extend this funding freeze for many schools to seven years. This has occurred during a period of rising costs due to health insurance, energy, transportation, implementation of new standards, contractual obligations and the general cost of living on other costs. Many local municipalities continue to face economic challenges and are not able to fund these cost increases. As a result, programs are cut, needed expenses deferred and /or class sizes increased. We do acknowledge that some schools during this period have experienced enrollment declines. As a result, most schools have reduced staff and related costs to adjust for these enrollment declines, when feasible, keeping in mind that such declines are spread across many grade levels. In spite of these reductions, other costs continue to rise.

CASBO urges the legislature to approve an increase of 3% in the ECS for each of the next two years. Although this will not make up for the flat funding of the past, it will help offset for some of the increasing costs that local boards have had to bear (many as the result of unfunded mandates).

Excess Cost and Transportation Grants

The Excess Cost Grant, which has provided some relief for very expensive programs that meet the needs of children with special needs, has been underfunded for years. Under the Governor's proposed budget, this grant is capped for two more years. This compromises the ability of school districts to provide adequate educational programs for all children. The transportation grant was established to partially reimburse districts for the mandated requirement to provide free transportation for students based on a statutory formula. Funding for this grant over the years has been well below the formula. This grant is again capped for the next two years. Cost for providing safe and efficient transportation continues to rise. As a result, many schools have had to reduce or eliminate programs for other students to meet this mandated program. CASBO urges the legislature to remove the caps and properly fund these important grants at their statutory levels. Such action will help every public school district to provide appropriate education opportunities for all students.

Vocational Agriculture Grant

Several years ago, a task force formed to study education funding issues, determined that there was a need to provide a more consistent and equitable level of state support among school choice programs. As part of this effort, the task force recommended that the state grant for VOAG centers be increased by \$3 million a year beginning in 13-14 for four years to bring it in line with the funding for non-Sheff magnet school programs. The legislature increased the grant by the recommend amount of \$3 million for 2013-14 but reduced the increase to \$1.5 million for 2014-15. The Governor's budget only increases the grant for 2015-16 by \$32,000 and \$ 0 for 2016-17. CASBO strongly encourages the legislature to honor the task force recommendations by increasing the grant by \$3.75 million for each of the next two years. Such funds could be taken from some of the increases that are proposed for magnets, charters and open choice programs in the biennial budget. This approach provides a fair and equitable solution to the underfunded VOAG grant that has existed for many years. Finally, such funding also provides a benefit for the sending schools since the prescribed tuition charged to the sending schools is reduced as the state grant increases. This is a win-win for the centers and sending schools alike.

Connecticut Education Network (CEN)

CEN provides unlimited Internet and filtering and blanket filtering contracts for K12 and libraries. The Governor's budget includes a cut of \$3.2 million to CEN funding, which is included in the Dept. of Admin Services budget. This cut will transfer the costs for these services to schools and libraries, which would result in another unfunded mandate. We ask that this cut be restored because schools are highly dependent on the CEN infrastructure.

HJ. 19

Unfunded mandates, although sometimes well intended, place additional financial burdens on school and municipal budgets that are already under great strain. CASBO supports this legislation as a reasonable step to ensure that any future mandates enjoy overwhelming support by both legislative chambers before they are enacted.

CASBO appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Appropriations Committee on these important matters.