

*Testimony of*

**Jeff Leake**

**Connecticut Education Association**

Before the

**Appropriations Committee**

Re:

**HB 6439 AAC THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH,  
2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**

**March 9, 2021**

Good evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Jeff Leake, and I serve as the President for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA). CEA represents educators in over 1,000 public schools across Connecticut.

We testify today on Governor Lamont's proposals addressing school funding and share our positions.

### **Overview**

- CEA supports following through on the state's commitment to fully fund the ECS formula in the next biennial budget. State education dollars must not be supplanted with one-time federal funds. Those federal funds are intended to help address the impact and inequities of the pandemic, especially in our urban and high-poverty school districts.
- CEA also supports proposals to address the education funding needs of small towns, especially those with declining enrollments.
- We support the Governor's pilot program allowing students from Danbury or Norwalk to attend school in a surrounding town.
- We recommend expanding funding for special education and bilingual programs.
- Finally, CEA recommends replacing the Minimum Budget Requirement with a restored Minimum Expenditure Requirement, to ensure that local funds budgeted for education and schools are actually released to our students and schools.

### **ECS**

In 2017, the legislature enacted a new ECS formula and phase-in process that has been followed since that time. Now is not the time, with the challenges of the pandemic and education needs

greater than ever, to freeze the state's ECS commitment, or rush through changes in the legislature's formula.

Freezing ECS would derail the progress made to maintain a predictable and dependable state funding formula. It will also create a large shortfall in the state's commitment to education in the next biennium, when the one-time federal dollars used to supplant state funding are no more. CEA believes the state should keep the promise it made in 2017, with the necessary increases in education funding each year.

We oppose the proposal to replace the state's commitment to ECS with one-time federal CARES or any other federal funds, because such funds are intended to help with the consequences of the pandemic.

Supplemental federal funds can help Connecticut address the needs of English learners, students living in poverty, students who have experienced trauma, those harmed by asthma and poor air quality, and special needs student facing unique challenges in these times. Specifically, we believe resources should address the following:

### **Social and Emotional Needs**

The impact of the pandemic on many school children has been traumatic. Schools need to provide more support from trained, certified social workers, counselors, and mental health professionals. It also means providing more opportunities for children to re-engage in enrichment activities, especially during the summer.

### **English Learners**

The growing number of students in Connecticut schools who are English learners is impacting districts—large and small—across the state. The state's support has been inadequate and primarily directed to a few large districts. This fails to meet the needs of all English learners in Connecticut.

If we fund ECS as planned and direct some of the federal funds to address the needs of EL students, we can re-engage students and help meet their needs. We also must keep track of ECS spending for English learners. Districts must be required to report the amount of ECS funds spent on EL students, in the same way that reporting is required for federal EL funds.

### **HVAC, Pandemic Air Quality, and Childhood Asthma**

Federal CARES funds can help the state address the air quality problems in our schools— heating, ventilation, humidity, and air conditioning. Poor school air quality has a disproportionate impact on children in communities impacted by poverty, and it fosters conditions that worsen childhood asthma. Poor school air quality and ventilation also hurts efforts to prevent the spread of infectious disease and viruses, such as COVID-19.

Recently, Vermont used federal relief funds to address school air quality head-on by instituting a program supporting indoor air quality in schools. Connecticut must do the same and provide support in the future through the state's school construction bonding funds.

## **Special Education**

CEA opposes the freezing of the Special Education Excess Cost grant. The number of students who require intense services is increasing, and the level of special education staffing is not sufficient—this hurts the ability of schools to meet children’s needs. The effects of the pandemic have worsened these challenges.

We must fund ECS as intended by the legislature and direct a portion of the federal relief funds to the needs of special education students during the pandemic.

## **MBR / MER**

CEA urges legislators to restore the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) to a Minimum Expenditure Requirement (MER). That was the law prior to 2007. And while the MBR is a policy decision addressed in the Education Committee, we recognize that it is still intertwined with discussions about ECS funding and the interaction with federal relief funds that pass through the state.

As currently written, the MBR is a loophole in K-12 education funding. It allows local boards of finance to take taxpayer dollars—collected for education—and shift them to non-education spending, without telling taxpayers. It was a short-sighted change that has since pitted local boards of finance against local boards of education. The fundamental problem is that the MBR tells towns how much they must collect for education but does not require that it be spent on education.

We used to have a better, more transparent system that delivered education dollars to our schools. Before July 1, 2007, the Minimum Expenditure Requirement (MER) required towns to spend local taxpayer monies collected for education on education. It is difficult to see how there can be an honest conversation about education funding until we ensure that all state and local taxpayer monies collected for education are spent on education. CEA supports restoring the Minimum Expenditure Requirement to ensure that the dollars we think are going to education actually are benefiting our students and schools.

Thank you very much for your attention to these issues.