

March 26, 2019

**Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee  
Students First Consolidation Invitational Forum**

**Testimony of Dr. Matthew Warshauer  
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Dear Representative Haddad, Senator Haskell, and other members of the Committee,

Allow me to begin by thanking you for holding this important forum and for the invitation to testify. The subject of community college consolidation, euphemistically titled “Students First,” is as critical to the future of Connecticut as the most important economic challenges facing our state. Should we fail to plan effectively and provide appropriate oversight for the future of public higher education, we will be making a grave mistake that will impact generations to come and with them Connecticut’s economy.

I would like to make clear that I am not opposed to having a system office that aides the community colleges and state universities in their missions. I am not opposed to consolidation of certain “back office” functions and purchasing. I am not opposed to Mark Ojakian as being a potentially successful leader of the system office. I said as much to him and my many CCSU colleagues when Mr. Ojakian first visited our campus.

I am, however, opposed to the system office micro-managing and attempting to take over the missions of the colleges and universities. Again, as I noted to Mr. Ojakian on his first visit, that is not his area of expertise. My concern then and now is that he would run the system office like a political operation with shiny, nice sounding plans such as “Students First” and “Guided Pathways,” all while expanding the system office’s footprint and spending tens of millions of dollars building a large bureaucracy. I believe that is exactly where we are today. We must remember that every single dollar the system office spends is a dollar taken away from the campuses and students.

In my opinion, what this committee needs to do is look very carefully at the numbers. How much has the system office spent on its many plans and consulting contracts since its creation in 2011? Some estimate it is well in excess of \$250 million dollars. One could argue that the new system office president should not be held accountable for previous administration’s mistakes, but even Mr. Ojakian has had his failures. Last year he assured everyone that by working closely with NEASC (now NECHE) a substantive change to the community colleges’ accreditation was on the cusp of approval. That was until NEASC refused to approve the proposal. Since then, the system office has been moving at break neck speed to create the infrastructure needed for another substantive change request in 2023. Again, we are assured that NECHE is supportive. The reality is that we will not know whether the NECHE commission is supportive until they actually evaluate the final proposal. That seems like an awfully big gamble. Moreover, I am uncertain as to why the system office is continuing to pursue a substantive change when the new community college is exactly that, new.

Equally important, we need to consider how the numbers for the system have changed. We were originally told the new system would save \$42 million annually. We were not given any figures on how much the consolidation itself might cost, but a later estimate proposed about \$2 million.

The more recent estimated savings are \$23 million following the completion of consolidation, while the costs of that consolidation continue to increase. The system office went from spending \$30 million in 2017 to a projected \$39.5 million in 2019.

The reality is that the numbers provided by the system office appear to be something of a shell game. Mr. Ojakian uses Georgia as an example of successful mergers, but that state's situation was much less complicated than Connecticut's, and they managed to save only 1% of their total budget. Mr. Ojakian estimates saving 5% with a consolidation that is far more extensive and complex.

My conclusion is that "Students First" is far more about building an unnecessary bureaucracy than it is about what's best for our students and institutions of public higher education. I implore this committee to work with their legislative colleagues and the governor in order to put a stop to consolidation. This needs to be done quickly. As we speak, the system office is in the final stages of hiring regional presidents for the community colleges.

After speaking with many of my community college colleagues, I can report that there is a great deal of concern, feelings of mistrust, a lack of confidence, and fear regarding this process. Since we have begun pushing back against consolidation over the last few months, there have been threats and warnings. These are being handled through our respective unions, but they speak to the intensity of the situation and the seriousness of what all of this means.

I will end with a recent email from one of my community college colleagues: "If you look carefully at the list of many on this email message and many of the signers of the petition, you see people who have been primary participants in so many system efforts (FIRC, FAC, SFAC, TAP, and more) who are fully committed to the success of their students and their colleges. The fact that their/our input when it is critical of consolidation is dismissed, ignored, or even treated as some sort of 'insubordination' is bizarre. This is our work. This is our contribution. It is a shame that in offering it, people are being threatened rather than allowed into a broader discussion."