

Testimony of
Kate Dias
Connecticut Education Association
Before the
Appropriations Committee

Re:

HB 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor

State Department of Education Agency Funding Hearing

February 23, 2023

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Representative Nuccio, Senator Berthel, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Kate Dias, and I am President of the Connecticut Education Association. CEA represents more than 40,000 active and retired teachers from over 150 school districts across the state.

CEA supports Governor Lamont's efforts to meet the commitments of our Education Cost Sharing formula by continuing the phase-in of full ECS funding. We also support efforts to expedite the phase-in of full ECS funding and to increase the per-pupil foundation amount and other formula factors that incorporate students' needs. We urge legislators to build on the ECS commitment met in the governor's budget.

We also commend Governor Lamont for including \$10 million in federal funding to help districts attract and retain educators. This is a good start to what we believe should be a significant new investment in education. However, a bold statement of investment is needed today, and \$10 million is not bold. Our educators need a strong, visible, and significant commitment to the things that will improve their working conditions.

Connecticut is experiencing unprecedented teacher shortages in school districts and also in educator preparation programs. If the state does not act now, at a time when it can afford to do so, we may lose this rare opportunity to make the kind of landmark investment in our public schools that can reverse this exodus from the teaching profession.

In 1986, with Republican majorities in the House and Senate, and a Democrat as governor, Connecticut passed the Education Enhancement Act, which included \$300 million for teacher salaries and class size reduction. That is equal to \$800 million in today's dollars.

It is time for the legislature to pass a landmark Education Advancement and Innovation Act that addresses the critical issues affecting schools today by:

1. Reducing class sizes
2. Starting salaries for teachers at 3.25 times the Federal Poverty Level for a family of two
3. Providing salary increases in line with similarly educated professionals
4. Offering incentives to attract students into education preparation programs and free public university tuition for required professional-level credits
5. Requiring an audit of the amount of funding and resources, including time, expended for state-wide standardized mastery testing

These are investments that will signal Connecticut is a destination for educators where we believe in and support the work they do.

Additionally, CEA supports funding efforts that lift all boats equitably; we must enhance support for students attending all schools, whether they be local public schools, interdistrict magnet schools, or charter schools. We also support more transparency and accountability in funding to ensure that state investments in education can attract and retain more educators, reduce class sizes, and make classrooms more conducive to instruction and more responsive and meaningful to students.

However, CEA is concerned about the inclusion of additional funding to expand the charter school sector. The state's expansion of the charter school sector has been staggering, especially when compared to the constrained growth in ECS. From 2010 to 2023, the state's investment in charter schools has increased by 180% at a time when the ECS grant only went up by 15%. Since 2001, the charter sector has experienced an increase in state funding by a shocking 860%. During that same time, ECS increased about 57%, which is significantly less than the 71% increase in the Consumer Price Index over that same time span.

Additionally, in our three largest school systems, the share of students enrolled in charter schools – which ranges from 10% to 16% of local enrollment – significantly impacts the mission and effectiveness of the district's local public schools. An expansion of charter schools into additional districts would initiate a similar impact there.

While we believe that students attending charter schools deserve sufficient funding, we do not support the continued expansion of this parallel system of schooling with public funds. We believe:

Charter School Students Should Be Fairly Funded: We support students in all public schools, charter schools included, receiving more resources and more equitable funding. In fact, CEA represents teachers in three state charter schools.

Charter Schools Should Play by the Same Rules: As charter schools receive more per-pupil funding, they should also play by the same rules as other public schools when it comes to transparency, accountability, certification, and student services like special education and transportation.

Charter Schools Should Not Negatively Impact Local School Districts: The expansion of charter schools in our neediest districts like Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, Middletown, New Haven, Norwalk, and Stamford would worsen inequities. Charter schools tend to attract and retain students who are less costly to teach and more likely to do well in school, leaving students facing the greatest challenges and who need more resources (including special education students and English learners) primarily concentrated in the local public schools. Charter schools also tend to reinforce segregation, which is contrary to other school choice programs, like interdistrict magnet schools, that promote diversity. Consequently, the state should prohibit the creation of new charter schools.

In summary, CEA urges Appropriation Committee members to support a budget that focuses on our existing public schools, targets funding to attracting and retaining qualified teachers, and makes our schools better places to teach and learn by reducing class sizes, addressing over-testing, and letting teachers teach.

Thank you for your consideration.