

Testimony of

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Connecticut Education Association

Before the

Education Committee

Re:

H.B. 6663 – An Act Establishing an English Learners’ Bill of Rights

February 22, 2023

Good morning, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, distinguished vice chairs, ranking members, and honorable rank and file members of the Education Committee. My name is Lou Rosado Burch, and I am the legislative coordinator for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA), representing educators in over 150 school districts in Connecticut.

CEA is pleased to offer testimony in support of HB 6663 An Act Establishing an English Learners’ Bill of Rights, and we applaud the committee for raising this important concept.

CEA strongly supports efforts to enhance opportunities and guarantee equal access to educational services for English learner (EL) students. We stand firmly behind our ELs and their families as they call for greater accountability, transparency, and resources for our students.

The population of EL students in Connecticut’s K-12 public education system is growing, even while the total student population is declining across the state. From 2010 to 2022, EL enrollment in Connecticut public schools increased by 50 percent (15,141) while enrollment of non-ELs dropped by 13 percent (69,318).¹ That means for every four-student drop in non-EL enrollment, one new EL student was added. During the 2021-2022 school year, nearly 1 in 10 students (9%) were identified as English learners. It is likely that millions of dollars the state received in federal K-12 grants – tied to enrollment – are because of the EL population.

We know that English learners start out at a disadvantage; a lack of proficiency in English can diminish educational outcomes in the long term. But these are just the beginning of the challenges these students face on a daily basis. ELs are three times more likely to experience homelessness than non-ELs, twice as likely to come from low-income households, they’re more likely to be misidentified for special education services, and are more likely to be suspended

from school than their non-EL counterparts.^{2,3} Frequently, these suspensions take place because the EL student does not fully understand school policies.

Unfortunately, a major impediment to the consistency and continuity of EL services offered to our students is the availability of state funding for EL programs and enforcement of existing protections. *It's worth noting that most of the provisions included in the EL Bill of Rights proposed by this legislation are, in fact, already statutorily guaranteed to all students.* That said, there is clearly a disconnect where families are not receiving the services they are entitled to and rely upon. The major challenges facing ELs in our state are a lack of adequate, *dedicated* funding for EL programs, a shortage of qualified teachers and support staff, and a lack of state oversight to make sure services and supports are being provided consistently and equitably.

Towns receive additional ECS funding for ELs; however, there is nothing in statute that requires these funds to be spent on ELs. Statutes do require that districts certify that funds from the Bilingual Education Grant were spent on ELs, but not for EL-derived funds from the ECS grant. In addition, there is no specificity on how funds from the Bilingual Education Grant or ECS are spent on ELs. To improve transparency and accountability, all funds that districts receive because of their EL enrollment should have required reporting detailing how those funds were spent, similar to required reporting for federal EL funds.

Separately, the state's Bilingual Education Grant is another pot of monies set aside specifically for bilingual education.⁴ Currently, only \$85 is set aside for each EL student each year for bilingual education.^{5,6,7} Furthermore, for a district to receive funding from this grant, it must have at least 20 ELs all in one school, speaking the same foreign language.

In reality, only the districts with the largest number of ELs receive funding from the Bilingual Education Grant because of the 20-student requirement. Consequently, the 20-student minimum is too high because it leaves out the majority of districts with EL students. Further, the \$3.8 million⁸ Bilingual Education Grant is woefully inadequate. This speaks to the challenges districts experience when seeking to provide effective, consistent services and bilingual instruction for English language learners.

Statistically, ELs who do not make adequate progress toward advanced proficiency after three to four years tend to do less well academically than those who graduate on time with their cohort.^{9,10} These students are "long-term" ELs, and some of their slow progress may be at least partially related to the fact that many of them change schools frequently, resulting in gaps in their English language instruction and inconsistencies in their access to EL services.

CSDE currently reports student data (i.e., academics, attendance, testing) using only two categories: ELs and non-ELs. Former ELs are included in the broad "non-EL category." These two categories do not provide enough specificity to accurately determine the true efficacy of our English learner programs. This can be remedied by adding more categories of ELs to better identify programs that work and those that do not.

Of equal importance, there should be a State Advisory Council for English Learners – like the Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education – to speak for ELs and act as a watchdog over the state's efforts to educate ELs, as is required by federal law.

To promote marked improvements in EL achievement, more attention must be paid to the availability of bilingual education teachers. In Connecticut, to get certification to teach bilingual education requires a fifth year of college or additional courses after the bachelor's degree. Consequently, it's more expensive to become a bilingual education teacher than a typical classroom teacher, though bilingual education teachers are not paid more than other teachers.

If Connecticut hopes to create meaningful improvements in educational outcomes for ELs, we will need meaningful investment and enforcement affirming the rights of EL students and their families. We strongly urge the Education Committee to strengthen this bill, to ensure ELs get the services guaranteed to them by state law. Finally, we must ensure that funds districts receive for ELs are actually spent on ELs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important issue. CEA applauds your efforts to ensure every student in Connecticut receives equal access to quality education, regardless of their status or English language proficiency.

Endnotes

¹ CSDE. Enrollment Counts, Taken from <http://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>

² CSDE (2015). *Data Bulletin*. Bureau of Data Collection, Research and Evaluation. Taken from <http://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>

³ CSDE (2017-2018). *Suspension Rates*. Taken from <http://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>

⁴ C.G.S. § 10-17f. Taken from https://www.cga.ct.gov/current/pub/chap_164.htm#sec_10-17f

⁵ OFA. Connecticut State Budget FY 22 and FY 23. Taken from https://www.cga.ct.gov/ofa/Documents/year/BB/2021BB-20210927_FY%2022%20and%20FY%2023%20Connecticut%20Budget.pdf

⁶ CSDE. 2021-2022 EL count. Taken from <http://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>

⁷ $\$84.7 = \$3,832,260/45,217$

⁸ OFA. Connecticut State Budget FY 22 and FY 23. Taken from https://www.cga.ct.gov/ofa/Documents/year/BB/2021BB-20210927_FY%2022%20and%20FY%2023%20Connecticut%20Budget.pdf

⁹ Education Commission of the States (2013). English Language Learners: A Growing –yet underserved –student population

¹⁰ Flores, S.M., Badalona, J., & Fix, M. (2012). The Educational Trajectories of English Language Learners in Texas. Migration Policy Institute. Taken from <https://migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-trajectories-english-language-learners-texas>