



TESTIMONY CONCERNING

H.B. 5283:

**AN ACT CONCERNING THE EDUCATION COST SHARING GRANT FORMULA
AND THE FUNDING OF OTHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

and

H.B. 5284:

AN ACT CONCERNING THE FUNDING OF THE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT #1

March 4, 2022

Education Committee

Chairman McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel and other members of the Committee,

The Center for Children's Advocacy (CCA), affiliated with the University of Connecticut School of Law, is the largest children's legal rights organization in New England. Our mission is to promote and protect the legal rights and interests of Connecticut's most vulnerable children and young adults who are dependent upon the judicial, child welfare, health, education, and juvenile justice systems. CCA provides holistic legal services to these young people through individual representation, systemic advocacy, education, and training.

CCA urges you pass into law HB 5283, An Act Concerning The Education Cost Sharing Grant Formula And The Funding Of Other Education Programs, as this bill will eradicate the educational funding disparities that perpetuate the racial inequities in our state's education funding system.

Under Connecticut's current funding system, which relies primarily on property tax, there are vast differences in educational funding between Connecticut's cities and towns, almost wholly upon racial lines. The school districts responsible for educating the majority of the state's students of color or BIPOCⁱ students, also are the districts with state's highest need students. These high need students include those economically disadvantaged students eligible for *Free and Reduced Price Lunch*, English Language (EL) learners and special education students. Yet, under Connecticut's current funding system, **these school districts are substantially underfunded to meet those student needs.**

The school districts of Bridgeport, Hartford, Waterbury and New Haven all possess among the **greatest numbers of students in each of these high need categories.**ⁱⁱ These school districts are also more than 75% BIPOC students. Yet, they are substantially underfunded when compared to districts with a majority of white students.ⁱⁱⁱ **The 2021 statewide gap** between districts that are primarily comprised of all white students and all other districts is **\$713 million dollars. This gap has increased from \$639 million in 2019.** For example, the school district of **Bridgeport spends \$2,600 less per student and \$1.4 million less per school than a typical white majority district** in Connecticut.^{iv} As a means of comparison, we can compare Bridgeport Public Schools to Greenwich Public Schools. While Bridgeport has historically spent only \$14,718 per student, with only \$3,106 of that coming from local funding, Greenwich Public Schools which has spent \$22,645 per student with nearly \$22,000 of those funds coming from local funding alone.^v Nearly 90% of all students in Bridgeport are BIPOC whereas on 38.6% of the students are in Greenwich. H.B. 5283 will correct these inequities in access to funding by ensuring full funding of the Education Cost Sharing grant.

H.B. 5283 will also ensure that funding will be based on **individual student need.** Under the changes outlined in the bill, the additional funding provided to districts could be used towards special education costs, as well as additional mental health services and supports – meeting the needs of their students to provide them with a free and appropriate public education, *without* the burden of grappling with the current reality of how local property taxes determine how funding is allocated.

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequities in Connecticut’s public education system, and the \$1.5 billion in federal COVID relief aid has momentarily reduced the racial funding gap. These one-time funds have an expiration date, one that makes it difficult for school districts to use for sustainable resources to alleviate the economic and racial disparities that persist in our schools. **H.B. 5283 will bridge the gap of the current fiscal cliff that is looming when ARP/ESSER funding is projected to run out, and provide schools with the funding that a student requires for their individual learning needs, regardless of their zip code.** If H.B. 5283 is passed, school districts will be able to both mitigate the impact of time limited federal funding and prioritize student-centered funding that will support social, emotional, and mental health goals without delay.

The state’s largest BIPOC districts need to do better by their students. Increased funding means enhanced learning and better outcomes for these students. There is no question that educational funding is connected to better student outcomes. Increasing funding will lead to greater success and brighter futures for those students who are struggling in Connecticut’s underfunded districts. Such achievement and opportunity is something *all* students deserve, not just white students. Recent State Department of Education data underscores the poor performance of students in underfunded districts. For example, in its last Report Card published

on EdSight (the State Department of Education public data portal), students in Bridgeport School District were nearly 17 percentage points behind the state average in math scores and more than 13 percentage points behind the state average in reading scores.^{vi} Increased funding would translate to more resources for Bridgeport's students in an individualized way, helping to improve and level student performance in the not so distant future. Bridgeport's students, just like students from Hartford, New Haven and Waterbury, are entitled to the opportunity to excel and grow. **H.B. 5283 and the increased funding it will direct at these districts and Connecticut's most needy students in general is essential for creating more equitable education system for our state.**

CCA commends the Committee for its commitment to learning more about Unified School District No. 1 by raising H.B. 5284, however would urge the Committee to make several changes to this proposed bill.

First, we would urge the Committee to speed up the timeline set forth in the bill from January 2023 to the end of the current school year. In light of the recent U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) December 2021 findings^{vii} concerning one of the largest and most resourced schools within Unified School District No. 1 (USD #1), the Manson Youth Institution, which outlines how **the district is blatantly violating special education law**, it is imperative that a thorough examination of the school district occur sooner, and no later than the end of the current school year.

Second, we would ask that the bill outline a more meaningful review of USD #1 with enhanced oversight, guidance and technical assistance from the State Department of Education (SDE). Given the transient nature of the USD #1 population and the provision of adult education to special education students still pursuing their high school diploma through state waiver, the state needs to provide technical assistance and guidance to USD #1 as to how to appropriately quantify enrollment numbers and identify what a commensurate per pupil cost would be for a traditional school district.^{viii}

Moreover, SDE should be providing more guidance and oversight for the administration of special education programming in the district given the concerns around programming, delivery of and access to services highlighted in the December DOJ investigative report. Finally, H.B. 5284 should require regular standardized reporting from USD #1 in the form of an *annual performance report* which models those provided by other districts with information on student enrollment by race, numbers of students with specialized needs or language needs information on student performance and graduation rates and more. The information published in the last USD #1 report card, with excessively low performance reporting, is grounds for great concern and underscores the need for more transparency and regular reporting on these needy group of students.

In summary, our office urges the Committee to past H.B. 5283 so that true educational equity can be experienced by all children, especially those in Hartford, Bridgeport, Waterbury and New Haven. At the same, we **ask the Committee to accelerate its focus on USD #1 and make substantial changes to H.B. 5284**, so it is more than just a standard study bill. Instead, we urge the Committee to pass a bill with an imminent deadline requiring SDE to provide technical assistance to implement regular data reporting that will look at not only cost, but also relevant demographic and performance data as well.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and time.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/

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ⁱ Acronym representing Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

ⁱⁱ School & State Finance Project, [Mismatch Between Funding & Student Needs \(ctschoolfinance.org\)](https://ctschoolfinance.org) *A Policy Briefing*, October 18, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ School & State Finance Project [Racial-Disparities-and-Educational-Funding-Fact-Sheet.pdf \(ctschoolfinance.org\)](https://ctschoolfinance.org), September 2020.

^{iv} School & State Finance Project, [What is Student-Centered Funding \(ctschoolfinance.org\)](https://ctschoolfinance.org), presentation, Fall 2021.

^v Based on figures from the 2019-20 school year. See: <https://ctschoolfinance.org/issues/spending>

^{vi} Connecticut State Dept. of Education, Ed Sight, Bridgeport School District Report card, School year 2020-21 found here:

https://edsight.ct.gov/SASStoredProcess/guest?_program=/CTDOE/EdSight/Release/Reporting/Public/Reports/StoredProcesses/ConnecticutReportCard&_district=Bridgeport+School+District&_school=+&_select=Submit

^{vii} See U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, December 21, 2021 report here:

https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1458001/download?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

^{viii} The fact that SDE oversight is necessary is demonstrated by the conflicting information in recent reports published concerning USD #1. See, e.g. EdSight's recent report card found here:

https://edsight.ct.gov/SASStoredProcess/guest?_program=/CTDOE/EdSight/Release/Reporting/Public/Reports/StoredProcesses/ConnecticutReportCard&_district=Unified+School+District+%231&_school=+&_select=Submit and

USD#1's annual report found here: https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DOC/Pdf/USD1/USD1-Annual-Report-2020_2021-120921.pdf which contain vastly different enrollment counts.