

House Republican Press Release

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EDUCATION FORMULA MUST BE OVERHAULED



An Op-Ed by State Rep. David Scribner

As the Legislature looks to the February start of the next legislative session, budgetary issues will likely remain a high priority. While we did increase local education funding to nearly every town and city in Connecticut last year, there is much work to be done on this issue.

The heart of the problem remains the state's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula, which unfairly distributes school funding. Some small but important changes were made in the formula during the past session. We eliminated two components that skewed the formula to give more money to big cities: 1) the low-achievement subsidy, which I have criticized as giving school districts an incentive to fail and 2) the density supplement, which a non-partisan study group recommended eliminating because it has no legitimate purpose.

The way the formula works, some wealthier towns would actually owe money to the state. Therefore, a floor was established when the formula was created to ensure that all towns receive some funding. During the past session, we raised the floor for wealthy towns to increase their funding and decrease the disparity. Brookfield falls into this category.

The reforms approved this year represent positive, yet essentially baby steps and the impact on the distribution of education funds was nebulous. For example, Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven collectively received 27.4% of all ECS funding in 2007. In the two years following the reforms, they will receive 26.2% of all ECS funding. This may not sound like a lot, but it amounts to about \$18 million less going to those three cities and being spread out over other towns.

What does this mean for Brookfield and Bethel? Brookfield will get a historic increase in education funding of 27% over these two years. While not as great but still significant, Bethel will receive a 10% increase this year and next year.

The downside of last year's efforts is that nothing was done to reform the component that is responsible for driving a large portion of the money to towns – the town wealth calculation. ECS' 'town wealth' component is one of the clearest examples of its many faults. For example, Brookfield is wealthier than Bridgeport in every way. In per capita

income, Brookfield is 2.3 times wealthier; in median household income, 2.4 times wealthier; and in equalized net grand list per capita, 3.6 times wealthier. However, when one compares the two towns using the wealth calculation in the current ECS formula, Brookfield is 8.3 times wealthier than Bridgeport. (The greater the number, the less ECS money a town gets). This is an unjustifiable distortion of town wealth.

To address some of these flaws that still exist, I have joined with fellow House Republican leaders in supporting a proposal that makes several key revisions to the ECS formula. First and foremost, proposal would rank town wealth using a calculation that more accurately reflects the wealth of towns – the average of each town’s Per Capita Income, Median Household Income, and Equalized Net Grand List Per Capita. This simplified version of town wealth would more accurately reflect differences in wealth, rather than exaggerating differences, as the current wealth calculation does, and yield a more fair aid ratio.

It would enact a ‘hold harmless’ provision to ensure that no town’s funding will be cut from one year to the next. In addition, it would give new weight to students in towns where Mastery Test Scores improve from one year to the next. Doing so would encourage improvement in school districts. To receive additional money, towns must show improvement in student performance.

Connecticut is not alone in recognizing that an ill-conceived school funding formula can produce a disparity that shortchanges suburban communities. New Jersey Governor Jon S. Corzine will soon propose a new education formula that would provide significantly more funding for children who live outside traditional inner-city school districts in that state. By re-evaluating components of what is in place now, eliminating some and adjusting others, I am confident Connecticut can enact needed revisions to our education funding system during the 2008 legislative session.