

**RE: H.B. No. 5033 AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION.**

**Submitted by: Lisa Thomas, Chairwoman, Coventry Town Council; Chairwoman, Capitol
Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) Legislative Committee**

Chairs McCrory and Leeper; Vice Chairs Winfield and Brown; Ranking Members Berthel and Zupkus; Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding H.B. 5033, *An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations for Education*. The Coventry Town Council supports Connecticut's students, teachers, and a strong public education system. However, due to Connecticut's local property tax-reliant education funding structure, we depend heavily on our state government for grant funding and policy predictability. Like many districts, Coventry has seen significant staffing and program cuts in our schools as residents are more resistant to voting yes to budgets that increase property taxes during these times of economic struggle. We would like to call your attention to the following impacts of HB5033:

- The additional cost shift to local budgets when districts become financially responsible for magnet school enrollments they did not plan for and did not agree to, will upend taxpayer approved budgets. If magnets can enroll "any interested student" into unused seats and the sending district must pay additional tuition and transportation, municipalities will face unbudgeted costs. Do we know the expected statewide and per-district fiscal impact of expanded direct enrollment and related transportation needs? These costs will exacerbate other unanticipated costs, such as for special education needs which can be incredibly high. Our Coventry Public Schools were in a spending freeze this year before we even got to December. This was due to unexpected special education costs, a common challenge in many school districts. Imagine how this will be compounded by unanticipated magnet school enrollments. How is it possible to consider flat funding ECS grants, while at the same time creating additional cost burdens on our schools? .
- Continued flat funding of ECS for the vast majority of towns, coupled with an outdated ECS foundation set over a decade ago, will continue to erode our education programs. Moreover, it continues a broken promise to towns to fully fund ECS grants. We and our neighboring towns have been forced to eliminate student lifelines such as social workers, music, sports, and arts programs, math and literacy interventionists, STEAM instruction, and library media materials. School districts don't *want* to make these cuts, but when taxpayers won't pass a budget that funds them there is nowhere else to turn.
- The Excess Cost grant continues to fall short in the face of startlingly increasing special education costs. While we appreciate that the budget enacted last session increases special education funding for FY27, this amount clearly is not sufficient. Coventry is not alone in not receiving reimbursement that fully covers its excess special education costs. The Special Education Task Force notes that "[c]urrent estimates indicate that most districts will be reimbursed less than 65% of their excess costs above the threshold of 4.5 times per pupil expenditure."

Adding another potential for significant unanticipated costs via unbudgeted magnet school enrollments while continuing to inadequately fund ECS and Excess Cost sharing, will further widen the equity gap from one district to the next. Even those districts regarded as “wealthy and well funded” faced significant budget reductions last fiscal year . We are experiencing ongoing declines in our great state’s ability to meet the CT Constitution’s mandate for an adequate education, much less the best education for our kids.

The Coventry Town Council joins its voice with the many others respectfully urging you to make the following modifications to Governor Lamont’s proposed budget prior to passage :

- Restore \$12 million dollars of funding for the RESCs to operate magnet schools.
- Adjust the ECS foundation amount to reflect cost inflation in the years since the 2013 foundation was set and don’t flat fund this grant to districts. Please consider indexing the foundation level to inflation to ensure adequate education funding for all school districts. The foundation is currently \$11,525. To keep up with inflation, the amount should be increased to \$16,000.
- Fully fund the special education Excess Cost grant and remove the cap that results in budget shortfalls and mid year reductions by districts.

We are grateful to you for reviewing our concerns and for considering proposed modifications to the Governor’s budget recommendations for education. As local legislators, we certainly understand the constraints you are under as you make decisions with statewide impacts.

Respectfully,

Lisa Thomas
Chair, Coventry Town Council
Chair, CRCOG Legislative Committee

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