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**Testimony Opposing, in Part, the Governor's Proposed Changes to FY 09 Appropriations
For the State Department of Education in
H.B. No 5021: An Act Making Adjustments to the Budget for the Biennium
Ending June 30, 2009.**

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Senator Harp, Representative Merrill and distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee:

We testify on behalf of Advocates for Connecticut's Children and Youth (ACCY), a statewide, independent, citizen-based organization dedicated to speaking up for children and youth in the policymaking process that has such a great impact on their lives. ACCY is the sister lobbying organization of Connecticut Voices for Children, on whose behalf we also testify.

ACCY and CT Voices strongly oppose the Governor's proposed reduction of FY 09 funding for school readiness in priority school districts and the omission of adequate funding for truancy prevention programs as recommended by the Families With Service Needs (FWSN) Advisory Board.

I. School Readiness Reduction

We strongly oppose the Governor's proposed budget cut of \$ 1.8 million to school readiness programs in priority school districts.

With the creation of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet in 2005, the legislature recognized the need to support and promote the development of Connecticut's young children. It is clear that three and four-year-olds must have access to high-quality pre-school if they are to enter kindergarten ready to learn. Data suggest that among children without preschool experience, 25% enter kindergarten with insufficiently developed language and literacy skills; 30% are not ready on math skills; 45% have insufficiently developed social-emotional skills; and 59% do not have the fine motor skills expected of them.¹ By comparison, two years of preschool can lead to dramatic increases in school readiness in all of these areas.² However, as of

¹ Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet, "Ready by 5 & Fine by 9: Connecticut's Early Childhood Investment Framework" (October 2006) at 12 (citing Connecticut Commission on Children, State Department of Education, and the Connecticut Center for School Change, "Opening the Kindergarten Door: The Preschool Difference," (March 2004) (hereinafter "Opening the Kindergarten Door").

² Id. at 13 (citing "Opening the Kindergarten Door").

2007, nearly 13,000 children in Connecticut living in families with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level still had no access to preschool.³

In FY 08, the General Assembly appropriated approximately \$5 million more to School Readiness than it did in FY 07,⁴ allowing the creation of 1,008 new preschool slots.⁵ The FY 09 budget approved last Session appropriated an additional \$15 million to School Readiness,⁶ which the Early Childhood Cabinet calculated would allow for the creation of approximately 1,900 *more* preschool slots (1,066 in priority school districts and 836 in competitive municipalities),⁷ as well as a necessary rate increase. This rate increase is essential, as providers have made clear that they cannot, and will not, expand capacity at existing reimbursement rates.⁸

If the Governor's proposed budget cut is enacted, Connecticut will face two scenarios: fewer school readiness slots will be funded and created – leaving many poor children unready for kindergarten – and/or the needed rate increase will not be implemented, meaning that slots simply will not be created. Either is a step backward.

Perhaps equally important is the effect this proposed cut may have on slot expansion in the future. Providers have expressed strong concerns that there is no guarantee of funds for slot expansion, and have identified the absence of such a guarantee as a major barrier to their own willingness to grow.⁹ A funding cut in FY 09 will only substantiate these concerns and will further dissuade expansion. For all of these reasons, the Governor's proposed reduction in School Readiness funding must be defeated.

II. Truancy Prevention Programs

We strongly encourage the Appropriations Committee to allocate \$350,000 for use in truancy prevention programs, as recommended by the Families with Service Needs (FWSN) Advisory Board.

Reducing truancy is essential to the well-being of Connecticut's children, communities, and future workforce. Truancy is a frequently cited cause of educational failure; even the most dedicated teachers cannot teach students who are not in school.¹⁰ Moreover, many students who fall behind due to missing school have difficulty catching up, become discouraged, and eventually drop out.¹¹

³ Governor's Early Childhood Research & Policy Council, "Ready by 5 & Fine by 9: Connecticut's Early Childhood Investment Plan (Part 1)" (February 2007) at 19.

⁴ Specifically, the legislature appropriated \$61,388,972 million to School Readiness in FY 08, compared to \$56,338,972 million in FY 07. See "An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education" (July 2007), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2007/SUM/2007SUM00003-R01HB-08003-SUM.htm>, and "An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education" (July 2006), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2006/ACT/PA/2006PA-00135-R00HB-05847-PA.htm>.

⁵ The Office of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the Bureau of Early Childhood Education, "Preschool Expansion Report" (January 2008) at 2, available at http://www.ecpolicycouncil.org/docs/2008-1-14/Preschool_Expansion_Report_to_ECE_Cabinet.pdf.

⁶ See "An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education" (July 2007), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2007/SUM/2007SUM00003-R01HB-08003-SUM.htm>.

⁷ "Preschool Expansion Report" at 6.

⁸ Id. at 3.

⁹ Id. at 3.

¹⁰ The precise scope of the truancy problem is not known due to problems in data collection and analysis, however, in Hartford nearly 10% of students are truant on any given day (see S. Goode, "Officers Find Few Truants in City Sweep," *The Hartford Courant* (May 4, 2007)) and New Haven estimates approximately 8 percent of students truant daily (see W. Kaempffer, "City

Research in Connecticut indicates that unmet educational needs, particularly for special education students, have a complex and likely reinforcing relationship with truancy,¹² and that truancy is often the first step in the process of dropping out.¹³ In addition, truancy can lead to juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, and unwanted pregnancy¹⁴ as many truant youth are left unsupervised at home or on the streets without productive activities to occupy their time.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the short and long-term costs of such untapped potential are devastating. Indeed, some estimate that the average high school dropout costs society more than \$800,000 over the course of his/her lifetime.¹⁶

Others' experiences have shown that truancy reduction programs that incorporate schools, families and communities can be successful in lowering truancy rates.¹⁷ Given the exceedingly high cost of high school dropouts, truancy prevention programs can be a remarkably efficient use of state dollars. A study prepared for the Colorado Department of Public Safety found that programs with success rates as low as 1 successful case out of 383 truants served would result in a locality breaking even on its original investment.¹⁸ It is reasonable to expect that a well-designed program in Connecticut also would be a wise and efficient use of state money that could pay for itself many times over.

Although some individual schools and districts in Connecticut have effective truancy reduction programs, these programs are ad hoc, uncoordinated, and sometimes so under-funded that they cannot meet the needs of all of the students who would benefit from them.¹⁹ Moreover, although the long-term costs of truancy are borne by the state as a whole – in terms of increased incarceration rates and decreased productivity and tax revenue – the responsibility for preventing truancy has, in large part, been left to individual districts. No single department or person within the State Department of Education (SDE)

Schools to Crack Down on Truancy,” *The New Haven Register* (January 6, 2007)). Further, the use of average daily attendance numbers, which are often reported above 90% for many schools, can obscure the true extent of the truancy problem as students are often absent on different days of the week (see. H. O’Leave and K Henry, “Mistaking Attendance,” *The New York Times* (September 2, 2007)).

¹¹ E. Garry. “Truancy: First Step in a Lifetime of Problems,” *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (October 1996), available online at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/truncy.pdf>.

¹² A. Spencer and E Breon. “Truancy: A Closer Look,” Center for Children’s Advocacy (December 2006), available online at: <http://www.kidscounsel.org/final%20truancy%20report%20dec%2020%2006.pdf>.

¹³ E. Garry. “Truancy: First Step in a Lifetime of Problems,” *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (October 1996), available online at: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/truncy.pdf>.

¹⁴ “Truancy Prevention,” Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available online at: <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/truancy/overview.html>.

¹⁵ For police efforts on reducing day-time street crime through truancy prevention initiatives see N. Chokshi, “Taking Truants Off the Street: Police are Fighting City Schools’ Truancy Rate as a Way to Fight the City’s Crime Rate,” *The Hartford Courant* (July 26, 2007).

¹⁶ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention citing “Truancy: Costs and Benefits,” National Center for School Engagement. Available online at: <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/truancy/pdf/CostsandBenefitFacts.pdf>.

¹⁷ “Truancy Prevention,” Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available online at: <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/truancy/overview.html>.

¹⁸ “The Costs and Benefits of Truancy Prevention in Colorado” The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, August 2002. Available online at: <http://www.coloradofoundation.org/pdf/costbenefitscolorado.pdf>.

¹⁹ According to the January 22, 2007 minutes from the Truancy Subcommittee Meeting of the FWSN Advisory Board, there is a range of attendance improvement programs occurring throughout the state. Some programs, such as the Truancy Court Prevention Project serving Hartford, are staffed full-time, while others, such as New London’s Attendance Review Committee, are comprised of teachers and administrators who meet after school hours to provide tailored attendance improvement interventions. A list of truancy initiatives through the state is available at: www.cga.ct.gov/kid/FWSN/NOTES%20from%20Truancy%20Subcommittee%20Meeting.pdf.

provides assistance to schools struggling with truancy.²⁰ Indeed, there are not even reliable state-wide data available as to the number, distribution, or characteristics of truants.²¹

In response to these concerns, the Truancy Subcommittee (a working group of the FWSN Advisory Board) – comprised of school officials, advocates and representatives knowledgeable in the field²² -- detailed a \$350,000 plan to specifically address truancy in 3-5 high-need districts.²³ The plan includes funds to support a full-time State Department of Education staff member whose responsibility would be to track and provide technical assistance for truancy initiatives and participate in statewide efforts to increase school attendance. Further, the majority of the funds would be allocated among the three to five districts with the highest truancy court referrals so they can create attendance improvement programs using best practices and based on FWSN Advisory Board recommendations. The recommendations include district-wide and child-specific interventions (such as implementation of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports within each school and linking students with community-based resources to re-engage them with the learning process).

The FWSN Advisory Board recommended a second \$256,000 SDE-based initiative to reduce the risk of FWSN referrals, like truancy referrals, to the court system.²⁴ This request also was not included in the Governor's proposed budget. The recommendation calls for increasing the capacity of four Youth Service Bureaus that have Juvenile Review Boards. Youth Service Bureaus are SDE agencies responsible for connecting youth and families to services and programs that assist in positive youth development. A Juvenile Review Board's primary function is to divert from the court those juveniles whose behavior at home or school indicates they are at risk for delinquency.²⁵ We strongly encourage the Appropriations Committee to allocate funding for expanding the capacity of Youth Service Bureaus.

We support the recommendations of the experts on the FWSN Advisory Board and believe that a relatively modest investment in the State Department of Education's budget would make a significant difference in the well-being and productivity of Connecticut's children, communities, and future work force.

²⁰ Currently, the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance is the only statewide entity focused on improving school attendance in Connecticut; it is organized by the Office of Policy and Management's Criminal Justice Policy and Planning Division. As of November 2007 (the most recent update), the Consortium included 26 districts. For more information, go to www.ct.gov/opm/cwp/view.asp?a=2974&q=383642.

²¹ The Judicial Branch does collect on the number and demographics of truants referred to the court system. However, not every truant within a school is referred to the court system.

²² A full of list of members is available at:

www.cga.ct.gov/kid/FWSN/Current%20Members-Truancy%20Subcommittee.pdf.

²³ "Recommendations Relating to the FWSN Population," Presented at FWSN Advisory Board meeting, January 28, 2008. The plan also included recommendations on: improving data collection on the number and characteristics of truant students; creating a differential response system for truancy referrals to the Department of Children and Families; and raising the age of withdrawal from school from 16 to 18.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Spigel, Saul. "Youth in Crisis Law and Juvenile Review Boards," CT Office of Legislative Research Report (December 27, 2004). Available at: <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2004/rpt/2004-r-0941.htm>.