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To all PTO CoPres., Treas., and PTC Reps,

*****Please send out to all of your school population via email.**

We are sending this in preparation for the upcoming budget meetings between the BOE and BOF as well as the public hearings.

One of the biggest hurdles our BOE and administration face every budget season is convincing the BOF that the school budget is not over inflated and that we truly cannot afford to make anymore cuts to our budget without it directly affecting our classrooms. This year, the administration is requesting the smallest increase in many years. And, much of that increase is contractual costs. Therefore, it is so important that our BOF have an understanding of the intricacies of the school budget. To that end, PTC members attend many of their meetings as well as meet with BOF members. We all may need to demand that the BOF members do more to understand the school budget before they make any cuts.

On Tuesday, February 9th, some members of the PTC executive board attended a meeting of the Board of Finance's Education Committee. All Board of Finance members were present. Also there to present information and answer questions were BOE President Jackie Heftman, BOE member Steve Polo and Dr. Judith Singer, Hugh Murphy and Mike Meyer.

The Board of Finance plays a vital role in determining the City's budget and the Board of Education budget. The finances of this City are truly in the hands of this board. It is for this reason that we think it is essential to give parents an idea of the level of discourse occurring at the meetings of this board. The Board of Finance operates with very little public oversight.

There were several items on the committee's agenda:

The Education Cost Sharing Formula allocation to Stamford ("**ECS**" allocation):

I. Background (Sorry for all this information but it puts the comments of the BOF members in context):

This is the main allocation of state funds to school districts in Connecticut, and the money is allocated according to a formula. The formula was derived in response to a school funding lawsuit decided in the late 1970's, in which the Connecticut Supreme Court found that the state's funding of public schools violated students' state constitutional right to a public education.

For many years, there have been complaints that the current formula is flawed and that, in particular, Stamford does not receive its fair share of state money.

PT Council, for the past 5 years at least, has prepared talking points specifically outlining many of the flaws in the formula, and the disparity in funding between Stamford and similarly situated municipalities. We have provided these talking points to the Board of Finance, we have met with the BOF in person and presented these points, we have spoken at public hearings regarding these specific points and we have written letters to the editor on this subject.

Some of the specific information we have provided to the BOF includes:

1. Educational cost studies and funding formulas across this country consistently show that for every child living in poverty, it costs anywhere from **1.5 to 2 times** as much to educate that child to meet state standards as it to educate a child with no needs.

- in CT, the weight accorded a child living in poverty is only 33% more than a child with no needs;

2. The same holds true for English Language Learners – the cost can be from **1.5-2 times** the cost of a child with no needs.

- in CT, the weight accorded a child learning English is only 25% more than a child with no needs

3. Across Connecticut, special education costs rise 5%-6% EVERY year. The cost of educating a child with special needs can be up to 5 times the cost of a child with no special needs.

- **Special Education is not even covered in our ECS formula.**

4. Stamford gets about \$500 (per child) in ECS funding while the median allocation to the other municipalities in DRG H (a category used to describe districts similar to Stamford) is over \$5,000.

The Education Committee meeting on February 9th:

Both Mr. Tarzia and Mr. Kolenberg asked Hugh Murphy for information regarding how much money Stamford receives as our ECS allocation.

After reviewing the numbers, a BOF member stated “It seems like we are being shortchanged by the state, given the needs of our students.”

Mr. Kolenberg commented that one would need a Phd in Calculus to understand the formula and Mr. Tarzia said that the formula should be thrown out.

Mr. Tarzia said that we should hold cities like Bridgeport accountable because there is only so much money to go around and if we hold Bridgeport accountable, ostensibly we could show that they are wasting money and we could get more state money as a result.

Ms. Murphy and Mr. Tarzia thought since we pay so much money to the state, we should somehow condition payment on getting more ECS funding.

Mr. Kolenberg suggested maybe “We write a letter” about the ECS funding to the state.

It is startling that the flaws in the ECS formula are news to the members of the Board of Finance. It is also troubling that they have such little understanding of how the formula works. To give a brief outline, here is how the formula is supposed to work:

A foundation amount is established that is supposed to represent how much it costs to educate a child with no special needs.

This per pupil foundation amount is then adjusted by two things:

1. Student need- the state assigns weights to increase the foundation amount if a child is living in poverty or an English Language Learner;
2. A Municipality's ability to pay: The formula is supposed to account for both income wealth and property wealth.

The basic flaws of this formula are: None of these calculations were ever based on an assessment of how much it costs to educate a child with no needs, or with special needs. Therefore, the foundation amount does not necessarily represent the cost of educating a child with no needs, and the weights don't necessarily represent the additional needs of children living in poverty or ELL students. In addition, the formula does not cover the needs of children with disabilities. Although the formula is supposed to account for town wealth, the income level is frozen at the 199 level (based on the 2000 census), so it does not accurately reflect Stamford's income and skews the ability to pay calculation toward property wealth.

The most basic flaw with this formula is that the Legislature ignores it every year and just adjusts the ECS allocation based on some unknown political calculation.

It does not take a PhD to get the above information. The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities has this information, and PT council has given this information to the BOF. As stewards of our finances, we expect that the BOF would have a basic understanding of school finance.

**** The current state budget projections:**

Mary Lou Rinaldi said that she looked at the State Department of Education Web site the prior day and noticed that the Governor wants to take away over \$426,000 of Stamford's ECS funding and she wondered what we could do about that.

It is frankly unfathomable that Ms. Rinaldi just now realized that Governor Rell seeks to take over \$426,000 of our ECS allocation away. In early December, PT Council wrote a letter to Governor Rell, Lt. Governor Fedele and the state delegation protesting this proposed cut. On December 2, we sent that letter to the Board of Finance, asking them to reach out to these officials (we also sent letters to the

Mayor and the Board of Reps, and we know the BOE sent its own letter to the state officials). PT Council also published an opinion in the Advocate laying out what this money represents and the history of its allocation, as well as the intention of the Governor to revoke it. In that op-ed we called on all our city officials to protest the cut. PT Council worked closely with Sen. McDonald and Rep. Fox on this issue. We reached out to our republican state delegates and Livvy Floren, who met with the Governor on this issue. The Mayor told us he called the Governor as well. We are frankly dumbfounded that this is new information to Ms. Rinaldi or any member of the BOF.

** Proof of Residence of Stamford Students

There was at least a 25 minute discussion on this issue, one that has been brought up by the BOF at several past meetings. The BOF asked for Dr. Singer and Mike Meyer to attend to explain the procedures of proving residency. The issue introduced by Mr. Kolenberg by telling a story about his friend who took his 3rd grader to a classmates birthday party in Norwalk. He went on to say that he has heard many other similar stories. He believes that the issue of out of district students attending Stamford public schools is out of control. Other than stating the he "hears it all the time" we are not sure why this issue seems to be one that he and Mr. Tarzia are so concerned about considering the vast number of more significant financial concerns.

Dr. Singer explained residency requirements and proof of documentation. She explained that such proof needs to be submitted when entering K, 6th and 9th grades. Mr. Tarzia and Mr. Kolenberg both think that proof of residency should be submitted every year by every family of a child in the SPS. Mr. Kolenberg analogized it to having to prove residency every year when applying for a golf permit.

Mike Meyer and Dr. Singer both told the BOF that the incidence of out of district students attending our schools is very small in proportion to our 15,000 students. Mike Meyer told of 6 families that his office investigated this year, 3 of which were proven to live in Stamford and 3 were not. The 3 that were not have left the district. It was made it clear to that this is not a grand scale problem.

Jackie Heftman pointed out that to require that all 15000 students prove residence every year would be quite costly, especially since the scale of the problem does not seem that big. Mr. Tarzia told Jackie not to feed him that baloney.

Charter schools

Kathleen Murphy has stated that the mere availability of grants should not drive policy in this city (i.e. this city shouldn't chase after a new idea just because there may be a grant available). However, she brought up the possibility of adding more charter schools to Stamford because there may be some temporary federal "Race To The Top" money available. She also said she went to a Domus presentation and was impressed by the presentation. .

Mr. Tarzia commented that maybe we could close KT Murphy and open either a magnet or a charter school. He did not seem to understand the difference between a magnet school, which would be part of

our district, and a charter school, which would not.

Jackie Heftman pointed out that the state board of education just voted down a proposal that would have required local school districts to pay tuition of about \$14,000 a year for Stamford students attending charter schools and that this proposal would have depleted our ECS allocation. She pointed out that the state is reassessing how to fund charter schools so now is really not the time to discuss opening up charter schools.

Again, there seemed to be no understanding of the costs or other educational issues relating to charter schools on the part of these members. What is so troubling is the cavalier way in which these unrealistic suggestions are discussed by the BOF members and then this same board goes on to cut the school budget while claiming that it is the fiscally responsible body and the BOE is wildly irresponsible.

Thank you and have a nice weekend.
PT Council Executive Board

Please be sure to visit our website at stamfordptcouncil.org.

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Co-President Newfield PFO