

EAST HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS (EHPS) LEGISLATIVE AGENDA 2023

The following document provides a framework with supporting data and context for EHPS' policy priority for consideration by the East Hartford Legislative Delegation in the 2023 Legislative Session. EHPS is prepared to provide additional detail, testimony and defense for any related forthcoming legislation. Thank you for supporting the children of East Hartford and your continued efforts to advocate for our community.

Legislative Priority: Support development and passage of a *Student-Centered Funding System*

Rationale/Purpose: Over the past several legislative sessions, multiple bills have been proposed that have included revisions to the Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) formula with the intention of making our state's funding system equitable and adequate for all Connecticut students. Unfortunately, none of these bills have proven successful, allowing the current broken funding system to remain in place. Building off previous efforts (namely HB5283), EHPS asks the East Hartford Delegation to actively work to regain the interest and support of the Connecticut legislature in the 2023 session to pass a *Student-Centered Funding System*. Using EHPS as a case study, this document identifies three critical goals that a *Student-Centered Funding System* would accomplish.

- *Align state support to student need:* First developed in 1990, the original [Education Cost Sharing \(ECS\) formula](#) was designed to provide a system for how the state supplemented city and town educational funding. After over 30 years of tweaks and modifications, it continues to be Connecticut's primary equalization education aid program. However, the formula's over-reliance on property tax and resident income as the determinants of aid have resulted in an outcome where the poorest cities and towns in our state spend the least amount of money on education. Reflective of this dilemma, the Town of East Hartford also faces this challenge of providing adequate financial resources to meet the growing needs of its students. As a [distressed municipality](#), East Hartford is one of the poorest communities in the state. For the past five years, the town has ranked as one of the 10th lowest municipalities/towns on the [Public Investment Community \(PIC\) Index](#). While multifaceted and complex, the town's fiscal status is deeply impacted by a relatively stagnant grand list, high unemployment rates, and lower than average median household incomes. Based on the town's inability to grow tax revenue, providing adequate resources to the Board of Education in the budget appropriation is a constant challenge. Consequentially, East Hartford is the 4th lowest funded district in the state and spends 19% less than the state average per child based on ([Net Current Expenditures per Pupil \(NCEP\)](#)). While funding increases have been provided through the Alliance Grant, these monies have been largely absorbed into operational programming (including the salaries of all teachers K-4) as the district has mitigated razor thin annual budgets. Beyond this context of financial challenge, student needs in the district have grown expansively. Currently, over 75% of district students are identified as high needs students (grouped as either being identified as a student with a disability, an English Learner or a student eligible for free or reduced-price meals). Since 2018, the district has seen an 36% increase in the number of English Language (EL) learners to an all-time high of 15% of district students. Additionally, the district has seen an increase in the number of students identified as Special Education (SPED) to an all-time high of 22%. Addressing the current misalignment between financial support and student need, a *Student-Centered Funding System*, would dramatically correct this imbalance. **By passing a *Student-Centered Funding System* into law, the Connecticut Legislature would establish equity and adequacy in how funding is allocated for all students based on need.**
- *Disentangle local districts from court mandated tuition payments:* The 1996 Supreme Court Decision, *Sheff v. O'Neil* called for the development of a state funded magnet system to desegregate Hartford Public Schools. As a part of this settlement, the state developed a process of partially funding tuitions while mandating sending towns provide the

balance of payment. As successive settlements added schools and seats to the region, this tuition obligation grew as participation and cost increased. Situated in the heart of the Sheff region, EHPS is deeply affected by this financial obligation. Currently, the district's FY24 budget includes a projection of \$6.7M for the tuition payments of 1,046 students. While recent legislative solutions have provided some respite, the challenge of burdensome and escalating tuition costs persists. As a critical component of the *Student-Centered Funding System*, the obligation of paying tuitions for students attending magnet schools would shift to the state and provide relief and simplicity in the process of local district funding. This step would disentangle local districts from court mandated tuition payments and allow them to reinvest funds back to community schools. **By supporting language establishing a *Student-Centered Funding System*, the Connecticut Legislature would maintain long standing integration initiatives while alleviating the unintended burden of tuitions for surrounding school districts.**

- *Relieve pending impacts due to the close out of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and Elementary and Secondary School Emergence Relief (ESSER) Funding:* In May 2021, in an effort to address learning loss suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic, Connecticut received \$1.1B in ARP ESSER funds allocated to school districts across the state. This funding required districts to work with the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to form plans that focused on renewal, reducing opportunity gaps, accelerating learning and advancing equity for all students. This funding was required to be fully obligated by September 30, 2024. While districts across the state worked to avoid re-occurring personnel costs in their utilization of ARP ESSER funds, over 71% of districts utilized over \$480M of the total allotment to cover salary costs ([School + State Finance Project](#)). Since FY24 is the last year salaries can be fully funded in ARP, districts will be faced with a difficult process to secure funding to maintain employees or engage in large-scale reductions in force. Exemplifying this issue, EHPS deliberately allocated the majority of the \$20,841,266 in federal aid monies to one-time facilities improvements and infrastructure investments. However, \$3,045,065 of ARP funds will be used in FY24 to support 48.54 positions that will need to be absorbed by the local budget or eliminated for FY25. Ranging from school custodians to high level administrators, these positions encompass every level of the organizational structure. As a critical component of the *Student-Centered Funding System*, escalating the current phase in formula of the Alliance grant to be fully implemented for FY25 (instead of gradually phasing in through FY28) would relieve the pending impacts due to the close out of ARP ESSER funds. This approach would eliminate the need for large scale layoffs and offer opportunities for districts to solidify current strategies that are funded by federal aid. **By supporting language establishing a *Student-Centered Funding System*, the Connecticut Legislature would ensure gains made as a result successful programming made possible with ARP ESSER funds was sustained into the future.**

The passage of a *Student-Centered Funding System* would be a dramatic and historic step for our state in advancing our commitment to our communities, our students and our future. Simply put, for the children of East Hartford, this is a game-changer. For the 2023 Legislative Session, EHPS urges you to engage in all discussion, debate and forthcoming legislation that supports this policy proposal. We are eager to help!