

June 13, 2005

To the Editor:

While we regularly hear from our constituents on many issues, the most common issue we currently hear concerns North Haven's state education funding. We would like to take this opportunity to share what we have been doing over the past two years on this issue.

First, we agree that North Haven deserves more state funding in general and education funding in particular. For us, the question has become how to bring the town that increased state funding, recognizing that, as two legislators out of 187 in the General Assembly, we must persuade significant numbers of our colleagues to help us in this effort (which therefore may involve forging a much broader solution). Given this reality, and the tight funding resources with which we must work at the state level, this is necessarily a long-term effort.

Alone and together, we have pursued many avenues to begin changing how the state provides local education funding. Last year, we, and some of our colleagues, proposed raising the foundation grant (the basic amount that each town gets to educate a child) and instituting a COLA (cost-of-living-adjustment) to automatically increase each town's ECS funding over what it received the year before. Unfortunately, we found that, to effect such changes immediately, we needed to articulate how we would fund them, both in overall terms and in the context of our state spending cap. Without new money, and without changing the spending cap, many would not join us in supporting ECS changes that might reduce their ECS allocation.

This year, we took a slightly different, three-pronged approach. First, we submitted a bill to increase local special education funding, and worked through the budget process to maximize the amount of education money that the town receives from the state under the existing ECS and special education formulas. Although we were not successful in lifting the ECS increase above what the Governor proposed, we did help to secure an additional \$105,000 in special education funding, along with roughly \$100,000 in general state aid.

Second, when we learned that the ECS formula uses data that vastly overstates per capita income for many towns, including and especially North Haven, we submitted a bill to require ECS to use the most accurate and up-to-date personal income data. We believe that ensuring that the ECS formula uses the best data is the only fair and reasonable thing to do.

Unfortunately, we discovered as we delved into this matter that it would cost far more than we anticipated. According to state budget analysts, because the ECS formula ensures that no town gets less funding in a given year than it got the year before, adjusting the formula in this way would have a huge cost. "Fixing" the ECS formula's per capita income data, without harming other towns, would cost roughly \$200 million more per year.

Although we could not resolve the funding issue and our colleagues' concerns about this idea before the session ended, we nevertheless got a commitment from the co-chairmen of the Education Committee to run the data this summer on how much exactly it will cost and who will benefit. We expect to review that information with them as we debate how to improve the system.

Third, we continue to work on securing state bond funds to help support the town's school system. Last year, we worked with Superintendent Querfeld to assemble a list of costs that the town had to pay to build the high school that had nothing to do with its educational mission, which costs came to more than \$400,000. While we succeeded in getting these funds authorized for reimbursement in last year's budget, we need to continue to work on getting some or all of this money actually released by the State Bond Commission.

Finally, we appreciate our constituents' interest in having us work on this problem, and remain committed to doing everything that we can to bring more state aid, and education aid in particular, back to North Haven. In the meantime, we encourage them to call, write, or email us if they have specific questions or concerns that they would like to share.

Sincerely,

State Sen. Len Fasano

State Rep. Steve Fontana