

School grants won't be cut, politicians say

■ **IN BRIEF:** In response to a budget cap, the state Department of Education has proposed to cut \$185 million in the Educational Cost Sharing grant that helps fund schools.

By Alexis Maislen
Staff Writer

Although the state education department has proposed cutting grants to towns, local legislators said it is a political move they won't support.

With the February 2000 budget process approaching, Gov. John G. Rowland asked all state departments to submit a proposed budget of their cuts to the Office of Policy and Management in order for the state to meet a spending cap of \$63 million. Next year's spending cap is a result of a few state departments running deficits in their budgets.

To protect other education programs, the department

■ Continued on page 11

School grants...

■ Continued from page 1

responded by proposing to cut Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) grants that give aid to Connecticut schools. The cutting of state aid is a big deal for wealthier towns such as Madison and Guilford, which receive little aid from the state. The ECS grants are determined by a formula incorporating numerous factors including a three-year average of the town's equalized net grand-list, per capita income, highest town per capita income, median household income, total population and student need. The ECS grant comprises \$1.3 billion of the state Department of Education's \$1.8 billion budget. This grant is distributed to towns and cities on a sliding scale of 20 to 80 percent of available funding based on need.

The state currently supports 42 percent of public education costs overall. Under the ECS grant program, a formula that has been used for about 10 years, communities receive between \$50 to \$5,000 per pupil, depending on need. In May 1998, the state approved a \$25 million increase overall in ECS funding.

Currently, in the 1999-00 fiscal year, Madison's ECS grant is \$578,787. Robert Hale, chairman of the Madison Board of Education, said the state proposal would reduce funding to Madison by \$70,000.

Guilford's ECS grant totaled \$2,672,410, according to Andy Potchney, who expects the town to receive the same amount in the next fiscal year.

"The state board of education voted to reduce the ECS grant by \$185 million. This will reduce our grant by \$70,000 - two teacher's salaries. Local taxpayers make up the difference," he said. "The state should be working toward paying for the cost of public education. Fifty percent of the cost of public education should be paid by state government."

Hale noted that the state should be able to give the \$587,787 to Madison.

"This is a small amount when you consider that some towns are entitled to \$1 million and \$25 million (grants)," he said.

Every budget session, the governor asks all departments to submit budgets under three scenarios. What would they cut if they had to reduce their budgets by 5 percent, 10 percent and 15 percent? The Office of Policy Management then uses these proposals as a base for next year's cuts.

State Sen. William Aniskovich (R-12) thought there is no chance the Legislature would cut the ECS funding to towns. He said the state Department of Education is try-

ing to protect its programs.

"What's really going on here is that the department knows full well that the Legislature will never cut ECS grants. Education is too high a priority. Proposing a cut in ECS is a way for the department to protect other programs. There's a little bit of gamesmanship going on here," he said. "I have tried to assure the board of education that there is no plan in the Legislature to reduce ECS funds."

State Rep. Patricia Widlitz (D-98) said she is not overly concerned with the Department of Education's proposed cuts, because they are not going to happen. She said she does not know a single legislator would support cuts in education.

"I haven't concerned myself with the numbers, because we are going to stop it from happening," said Widlitz. "The commissioner of education is really smart making these proposed cuts public, because it has immediately raised the awareness that this is looming and there is no way the Legislature is going to propose cuts in education."

She added that legislators have been fighting locally for Guilford to maintain a constant ECS grant, but if they had just let the ECS formula continue as it was, the town would continue to lose \$72,000 a year.

"We've been able to stop the bleeding and maintain the status quo. There is no way this is going to happen. Each (education) department did what they were instructed to do and identified where they would target cuts if they came too close to spending caps, but making this public has escalated into a grassroots effort against the cuts. There is no support for this," said Widlitz.

State Rep. Peter Metz (R-101) opposed the state education department's suggestion to cut ECS funding.

"They were out of line by doing that. There is nothing being done by the Legislature to reduce ECS, and I don't think there will be," he said. "I think that this is a red herring."

Metz pointed out that during the 1998-99 fiscal year, the Legislature passed a "stop-loss" provision that prevented any municipality from receiving less money in the ECS grant in a future budget year.

Aniskovich said what is driving the budget discussions is that the state is getting close to the \$63 million spending cap and several departments such as Corrections and Human Services are running deficits in their budgets.

"Some departments run deficiencies every year. This is a normal part of the budget process. The Legislature

would never cut spending in a future year to fill a hole in a previous year," he said.

He added that one way to deal with these deficiencies is to examine state programs with lapsing funds, funds that were appropriated but never expended.

A coalition comprised of the Connecticut Council of Municipalities (CCM), the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) and the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) sent a letter to the state board of education expressing concern that a 10 percent budget cutting plan would slash \$185 million from the state's ECS grant. They were particularly concerned because ECS pays for one-quarter of all kindergarten through 12th grade public education spending in Connecticut.

"This 13 percent cut in ECS is described (by the state) as 'the least harmful' among budget cutting alternatives considered by the department and the board," they wrote in their letter. "Do you really mean to minimize the harm this will cause to schoolchildren, schools, cities and towns and property taxpayers?"

In an Oct. 20 letter responding to the coalition's concerns, Commissioner of Education Theodore Sergi said, "Nowhere in the materials or in our intent did the state board 'recommend,' 'approve,' or 'endorse' a 10 percent reduction in ECS. I know the board does not support a 10 percent reduction in ECS, as it has consistently supported increasing the state's support for education. There is no legitimate method for reducing the SBE (state board of education) budget without significantly harming the education of Connecticut's children."

A spokesman for the Department of Education thought CCM, CEA and CABE raised concern for the proposed 10 percent cuts to reinforce the idea that the state and municipalities should be equal players in paying for the cost of education.

"This raises the issue of the importance of state aid and shows the level of concern of local governments of reliance on state aid," said Tom Murphy, spokesman for the state Department of Education. "There's been a great deal of confusion out there on what action the board did take. The board has been a strong advocate of increased support for local education. It was quite a shock to read the press release (from CCM) suggesting they were not."

Traci Ezold also contributed to this story.