



Testimony in Support of H.B. 5424

Submitted by Carol Platt Liebau, President

February 22, 2023

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Finance Committee regarding H.B. 5424. My name is Carol Platt Liebau, and I am the President of Yankee Institute, a policy organization dedicated to empowering Connecticut's people to forge a brighter future for themselves and their families.

Across our state and in this chamber, there are many issues on which people disagree. But surely all of us agree on this: Every child is equally important — regardless of race, socioeconomic background, religion (or lack thereof), disability, or zip code. And it is our duty to give each child the chance to succeed.

We all know education is the pathway to a good job and financial security. But it's more — it's the doorway to a life of dignity, meaning, and purpose. And that's why every one of our children deserves access to a quality education.

Opportunity scholarships are designed to help students whose educational needs aren't being met in their current learning environments. They would offer families the opportunity to pay for approved schools, courses, programs, and services of their choice — enabling them to focus on the unique needs of their children and their individual strengths and challenges.

These scholarships would cost our state virtually nothing, while still helping students including those diagnosed with learning disabilities; those from poor families; and those who've been bullied. The scholarships will be funded entirely through private donations, which would be eligible for a tax credit.

Businesses and individuals could donate to nonprofit organizations providing scholarships to eligible Connecticut students. In return for the donation, these taxpayers can take a dollar-for-dollar, 100% credit against their state income tax. The program is capped at \$25 million in state tax credits. Eligible students can apply for scholarships through nonprofits that offer them. It's a win/win.

Actually, it's a win/win/win. Expanding educational access and choice will have the positive byproduct of revitalizing our cities and improving Connecticut's workforce development efforts. Many of our cities experience outflows of young families when their children approach school age. Bridgeport has the highest rate of family flight in the nation, according to research by Dr. Bartley Danielson, professor of finance and real estate at North Carolina State University.

Nor do opportunity scholarships weaken our public schools; in fact, they strengthen them. Out of 33 empirical studies on education choice's impact on academics in public schools, 31 found choice programs

improved the performance of nearby public schools. What's more, they actually increase per-pupil spending on students who remain in their assigned schools; when a student withdraws from a public school in order to participate in a scholarship program, the public-school system retains funding for a student it no longer educates.

Tax credit scholarships already exist in 18 states including Illinois, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. Eligible taxpayers can include both individuals and businesses. The overarching goal is to ensure that each child is learning in the educational environment that offers him or her the best opportunity to succeed.

In the wake of school shutdowns prompted by the Covid pandemic, Connecticut's Department of Education has reported that nearly 24% of students are chronically absent, up from 10% before the pandemic. Fewer students are going to college. And these trends are particularly pronounced for students from low-income families. The status quo is failing. Struggling students — particularly those from low-income households — need new solutions now.

Rich parents shouldn't be the only ones who get to craft an education plan based on their children's unique needs. Every family deserves flexible education options that best fit their student's individual requirements.

It's time for Connecticut to put students' needs first and establish Opportunity Scholarships.

Thank you.