



EDUCATION – GOVERNOR STEWART’S “FIRST 500” PLAN

Governor Malloy instituted a “First Five” to bring a few large businesses to Connecticut. Our next Governor should apply this to schools.

As Gov. Malloy’s successor, I would push for some credit to the first 500 education groups that set up private schools. These schools can be high schools, middle schools, or elementary schools. The high schools can have almost any specialty: Science, Performing Arts, Hospitality, Sports, Communications, Math, Health Sciences, Public Safety, or Languages. The K - 8 schools can be dedicated to Special Needs, to “At-Risk”, or to Newly-Arrived students. All schools at any grade level can have a religious disposition or stay secular. So long as they are likely to educate students better than the schools the child is leaving, we seed them and we partially fund them.

“First 500” is a boon to good educators and good administrators. But mostly, it’s a boon to students. The method for ongoing state funding is vouchers. Vouchers are successfully used in several cities; we can apply the system to the whole state. This would replace “equitable cost sharing”, which is anything but equitable. This would replace budget wrangling on a town-by-town basis. And this would replace the need for state funding cuts that will plague us every time the legislature fails to reach a budget agreement.

Vouchers work by assigning a credit to each child to be used in an approved school. The school is paid the value of the voucher, by the state, for each child the school educates. A well-run school will attract more students, but also gain better funding.

Families have true choices. Students are not locked into a school or even a district. They can cross district lines to go where the best opportunities lie for them. Some will use public transportation; others will carpool; others will be served by schools offering a bus. Still others will be served by a collaboration of schools in close proximity who share buses, drivers, and routes.

Where might these schools pop up? Anywhere there’s a building for lease. In West Hartford there’s a lovely campus that goes begging; in Stamford there are former GE offices that are still unfilled. When Aetna’s top brass leave for NYC, there will be office space in Hartford too. (I’d happily trade bright eager students for crass departing executives). Where there is no building, a school group can quickly build modular classrooms. Except for a few secondary school laboratories, facilities are almost irrelevant. Students learn well where there are good teachers and a good environment.

Traditional funding too often yields BAD learning environments. Teachers are not incentivized to teach well. Those who do have a passion for teaching well are hamstrung by federal “Common Core” requirements. First 500 is meant to apply most of the incentives for businesses to the schools. First 500 funds \$2000 for every student the school will take on, and \$3000 for every faculty member or staffer.

The big remuneration comes from vouchers. Every student funds the school with her or his attendance, because she carries a \$6000 to \$15,000 voucher. The voucher travels with the student. That puts immense choice in the student's hands, and I believe families are wise enough to use it well. They are not going to get a school for "wiccans" off the ground.

This also puts immense POWER in the hands of families. Good. For too long they have been disempowered. Families have little choice when a district is calling the shots and your only choice is an often unaffordable private school. With vouchers, if there's no good private school in your area, your family and 19 other families can afford to start a school.

November 2018 leaves enough time to set up a school by August, so long as there are no bureaucratic delays. Families should look forward to election day – better schools will then be 10 months away.