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14 June 2021

*Via Online/Email Delivery*  
Ridgefield Board of Education  
Dr. Da Silva

Re: RPS participation in the Open Choice program

Members of the Board of Education and Doctor Da Silva:

The Ridgefield Allies Board of Directors and volunteers recognize and appreciate that members of the Ridgefield Board of Education (BOE) and Ridgefield Public Schools (RPS) Administration proceed from a sincere desire to serve our community and make the best possible decisions for our children. We were thus chagrined and disappointed by the large number of misconceptions, misstatements, mischaracterizations, and mistakes that were expressed during the May 24, 2021, discussion about the Open Choice program. We recognize that the depth and breadth of important issues before the Board makes it difficult for you to research every matter as it is presented to you, so we are sharing the following objective, factual information in order to assist you in correcting the record and making what should be an easy decision for RPS to participate in the Open Choice program.

In the information below, we address the fiscal/economic benefits of the Open Choice program. Additionally, we highlight the growing mountains of evidence demonstrating the significant net benefits of diversity in general and the specific benefits derived from the Open Choice program by both “home students” and “guest students” of participating school districts.

#### PROGRAM ECONOMIC & FISCAL BENEFITS

Distressingly, there seemed to be almost no acknowledgement during that May 24 discussion that there is no credible basis to dispute the overwhelming economic and fiscal soundness of Open Choice. The programs’ record of delaying/avoiding costs is clear-cut, but its success on that metric is driven by concrete economic and fiscal realities.

As you know from your annual budget process, school systems do not display long-run granular marginal cost structures. Rather, a school system’s cost structure displays a massive step-function when the school system exhausts existing capacity.

- If a school system nearing exhaust is unable to send students elsewhere, then it will be forced to invest in additional buildings, transportation, other physical plant, blocks of utilities and IT, faculty, administrative staff, etc.
- At that point, both the short-run marginal cost and long-run marginal cost of the “next” student become essentially identical to the cost of an entirely new school and both the overall system cost and the average cost per student might roughly increase by the factor of 1 divided by the number of existing schools (e.g., if a system has 2 high schools and must add a 3<sup>rd</sup>, the overall system cost and average cost/student might increase by 50%).
- Because these are fixed investments, and thus long-term, the school system must size capacity additions not based on near-term estimated needs, but for long-term population trends (without regard to any projected *temporary* reductions) in order to minimize overall costs and fiscal sustainability over time.



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Conversely, when a school system has unused capacity (buildings, transportation, other physical plant, utilities, IT, faculty, administrative staff, etc.), the short-run marginal cost of an additional student is *di minimis* and the addition of each new student typically results in the lowering of the average cost per student across the entire system.

- From a purely economic and fiscal perspective, the Open Choice plan substantially mitigates the step-function cost structure problem by enabling the cost-effective and efficient shifting of students from capacity-constrained school systems to capacity-available school systems on an as-needed, as-available basis.
- This not only enables the near-exhaust (the “sending”) school system to minimize its overall cost structure and delay or altogether avoid massive new investment, but it also allows the “receiving” school system to accrue incremental funding to apply against its own largely fixed costs of EXISTING capacity. The receiving school system will thus enjoy an accelerated reduction in its own average cost per student.
- Furthermore, by filling unused capacity of the receiving school system, the program may allow that system to avoid or materially delay the costly, unrecoverable waste and student displacement of closing (and subsequently reopening) school facilities in response to short-term population reductions.

Finally, the costs of the Open Choice program funded by the state are a fraction of the capacity costs the sending school (and the state) would otherwise incur. Thus, as a fiscal and economic matter, the Open Choice program is a clear win-win for all parties -- the sending school, the receiving school, and the state budget.

#### DATA, TESTIMONIALS, AND RESULTS

In response to claims there is “no data” to justify Open Choice, we wish to point out that there is copious readily available data demonstrating the success of similar programs, the success of the methodologically “adjacent” ABC program, and about the exhaustively studied beneficial impacts of increased diversity on success/results in businesses, higher education, and public institutions across ALL industries, disciplines, etc. The benefits and successes accrue to all participants, both “guest” students and Ridgefield resident students. Following are descriptions/links of just some of the proofs:

- Open Choice was formerly known as “Project Concern”. Under that name, the program was evaluated and documented as having positively changed lives, as reported in the Hartford Courant at (<https://www.courant.com/courant-250/moments-in-history/hc-xpm-2014-06-29-hc-250-project-concern-20140625-story.html>).
- The general benefits of diversity and inclusion have been extensively documented with strong consensus among researchers and studies across all relevant disciplines. We recommend the following articles summarizing such conclusions by extremely well-regarded research and academic organizations:
  - *McKinsey & Company*: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>
  - *Harvard Business Review*: <https://hbr.org/2016/09/diverse-teams-feel-less-comfortable-and-thats-why-they-perform-better>
- The particular benefits of diversity efforts in public education are also extremely well-documented and subject to strong expert consensus. We refer you to these sources (the bibliographies of which contain references to many additional primary and secondary sources):
  - *American University, School of Education*: <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/benefits-of-inclusion-and-diversity-in-the-classroom>
  - *The Century Foundation*: <https://tcf.org/content/facts/the-benefits-of-socioeconomically-and-racially-integrated-schools-and-classrooms/>



- Finally, in regard to a desire to hear testimonials by participating students and faculty, we refer you to these sources:
  - *Voices of Choice, Participants Comment on the Hartford Region Open Choice Program:*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbJlwFNjO4>
  - *Letter: Portland Superintendent Responds to Open Choice Reporting:*  
<https://ctexaminer.com/2019/12/17/letter-portland-superintendent-responds-to-open-choice-reporting/>
- Finally, please note that participating guest students are not randomly assigned to the program, but rather volunteer for the program with their parents' permission, just like the successful ABC Program, charter school programs, and magnet school programs.

#### CONCLUSION

As demonstrated and documented above, however, the Open Choice program is fiscally, academically, and socially net-beneficial for both “home students” and “guest students”, and for both “receiving school systems” and “sending school systems”. Ridgefield Allies urge you to approve RPS participation in the Open Choice program.<sup>1</sup>

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alex Harris".

Alex Harris, Executive Director  
On behalf of Ridgefield Allies Board of Directors

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<sup>1</sup> We should note that Ridgefield Allies does not believe Open Choice represents a comprehensive solution to educational inequities in Connecticut, but it does somewhat mitigate such inequities.