

Select Committee on Children  
March 4, 2010

Testimony of Mark K. McQuillan, Commissioner of Education

ON

**RAISED BILL 360: AN ACT CONCERNING CHILDREN IN THE RECESSION**

The Department of Education opposes Raised Bill 360 which requires the Department of Education to administer, within available appropriations, a child nutrition outreach program to increase participation in the federal School Breakfast Program, federal Summer Food Service Program and federal Child and Adult Care Food Program, and then to utilize results-based accountability to determine the impact of these activities. Our child nutrition unit already conducts outreach and administers all of these programs and therefore additional legislation is not required to do so. At the same time, while the Department is currently conducting these activities, there is concern that this legislative mandate could create an unrealistic expectation and not allow the Department to determine appropriate adjustments to agency wide strategies based on individual program participation should staffing patterns change or implementation of new federal programs be required. In addition, requiring the Department to develop RBA templates for each of these activities, collect and report the data, implement outreach activities beyond those describe above, and develop a data development agenda without providing any additional administrative funds would create an undue burden on Department staff that we cannot support.

The bill requires the Department to encourage schools to participate in the federal School Breakfast program. Just this past year, the Department created a "Connecticut Breakfast Expansion Team" lead by the Department with representatives from the New England Dairy Council, End Hunger Connecticut, the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut and General Mills which is specifically designed to increase participation in the school breakfast program. This group conducts ongoing outreach, especially to high need districts, provides direct technical assistance to all schools that request assistance and has developed promotional materials. Of note, some of the barriers to increasing participation in this program is not the lack of outreach but rather challenges around logistics and scheduling as well as the lack of understanding by school administrators that school breakfast programs are available to all communities, not just for the neediest communities. The Department is working aggressively to remove these barriers.

The bill further requires that the Department encourage local and regional school districts to sponsor Summer Food Service Program sites, recruit other sponsors of such sites and make grants to site sponsors to assist them in increasing child participation. On an annual basis, the Department monitors, evaluates and reports on the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). In addition, as required by the United States Department of Agriculture regulations, the Department conducts outreach for the summer food service program, by issuing press releases and targeting communities that are eligible to participate based on number of children eligible for free and reduced meals. The SFSP has consistently increased participation by approximately 11% over the last two years.

The bill also requires that the Department encourage day care centers to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The CACFP routinely conducts outreach by engaging with the Early Childhood Unit to identify new school readiness and head start programs as well as with the Department of Public Health to identify currently licensed daycare providers (both centers and homes). The Department has established an RBA template for this program and currently uses this data to monitor and adjust its outreach. Of note, the barriers to participation in the CACFP programs are not just related to outreach efforts but rather that many of these smaller programs do not have the capacity to meet the rigorous federal regulations. In addition to lack of capacity to administer these programs, there are no additional state dollars to support the program and the federal reimbursement is supplemental and does not cover all of the costs associated with providing meals in the CACFP.

The bill also requires the Department to publicize the availability of federally-funded child nutrition programs throughout the state. This is standard operating procedures for all of the Child Nutrition Programs. Certainly, the Department would implement any grant funds provided by the state to increase participation in these programs; however, administering additional grants programs with the existing staff levels would be difficult without administrative funds for the state agency.

Lastly the bill requires the Department to develop RBA templates for each of the activities. While the Department currently embraces and administers it for the CACFP and certainly appreciates the importance of the RBA work, the implementation of an RBA template for each of these programs should be integrated into the Department's agency-wide RBA design as recently presented to the Appropriations Committee rather than a legislatively mandated RBA process annually for these programs. In addition, each of these programs already has mechanisms in place to report the results of the program participation and outreach efforts. For the school breakfast program, the Department provides data to the Food Research and Action Council for their annual national report; and for the summer food service program, the Department annually develops and provides a detailed summary of the program participation and outreach efforts for USDA. In addition to these reporting requirements, all of the child nutrition programs are monitored regularly and consistently by the federal government under the direction of USDA.

Due to the fact that this bill mandates the Department to do work that it is already doing, without providing any additional resources to conduct these activities and limits the state agency's ability to adjust agency strategies based on increased participation in all programs along with other program demands, the Department must oppose Raised bill 360.