Connecticut General Assembly – Education Committee
Testimony of Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor
February 21, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Giuliano, and members of the Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to consult and work with you over the last several months, and for the opportunity to appear with the Governor today. I want to thank Governor Malloy for speaking so passionately, both in his State of the State address and here again today, about education in Connecticut, and about the unique moment of opportunity that exists today.

I am here, today and in the weeks to come, to take your questions and to work with you on producing legislation we can be proud of. Before I do so, I want to talk about the ideas that underpin SB 24, and the process we used to get here.

I'll start with the title for the bill: An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness. We chose it to underscore that, in order to be economically competitive, we need to ensure that Connecticut is educationally competitive with other states – and, indeed, other regions of the world. Our NAEP results show that other states are catching or leapfrogging us. In 2003, our eighth graders were on par with their peers in Massachusetts. Today, nine years later, our students are lagging behind. We must do better if we are to field a globally competitive workforce.

Over the past several months, we have undertaken an extensive consultation process. As a team, we have met with dozens of legislators. We have conducted numerous conversations with superintendents, local school board members, and principals. On my listening tour I heard from educators and parents from across the state. And we've met with each of Connecticut's teacher's unions for detailed policy discussions no fewer than a dozen times each.

The same themes have emerged over and over in these listening and consultation sessions – themes that underpin the Governor's six principles and that can show the way toward the state's economic revival.

- The importance of focusing the system around the strengthening of the education professions – ensuring that teachers and school leaders are recognized, respected, and rewarded for their practice and performance, and that they have the supports they need to engage in the continuous improvement of their craft.

- Refocusing the system on student learning – placing student achievement at the center in every way.

- Paying most attention, providing the most resources, and getting most involved where we're most needed – in our lowest-performing schools and districts.

- Early intervention, whether in expanding early childhood or in ensuring early grade reading mastery.

their practice as judged by district evaluations, they will continue to hold one of the new system's certificates and therefore will remain eligible for employment.

Let me now address teacher tenure. We do not aim to abolish tenure. Instead, we seek to reform it. The package defines ineffectiveness, not mere incompetence, as a potential cause for termination. As the Governor has stated, we believe in due process, and we believe there is a place for earned and sustained distinction, recognition, and protection – again, so long as it's earned and sustained. If dismissed, a tenured teacher will still be entitled to appeal the decision at an impartial hearing. To reduce time and cost, we propose conducting this hearing before a single arbitrator. And we propose time limits on the length of hearings. In these hearings, school districts will still be required to make the case successfully that the dismissal was justified and that an appropriately serious effort was made to provide real remediation and support.

Before I close, I want to address one more point if I may. Students in low-income communities face myriad barriers to achievement – including the problems associated with poverty. But we know from the best public schools – in Connecticut and nationwide – that children can achieve at high levels, no matter their neighborhood or circumstances. Geography is not destiny. Poverty is not destiny.

Effective schools can make an enormous difference. They can change the trajectory of children's lives. And if schools enable students to enter college, the chances increase dramatically that the trajectory will be changed across generations – that our children's children will make it to college as well, and that they'll have significantly improved life prospects. Such schools do so by embracing many of the ideas that underpin the Governor's legislation – most of all, positioning teachers for success and focusing on student learning.

Together, we can enable many more of our schools to reach high levels of performance and to close the achievement gap. Together, we can make Connecticut the kind of place it should be for our children – a state where the strength and success of our school system is our first priority and where the education we offer our young people is second to none. Thank you.