



# Norwich Public Schools

Abby I. Dolliver, Superintendent

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## MEMO

Date: February 20, 2013

To: Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Minor and Distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee

From: Abby I. Dolliver, Superintendent, Norwich Public Schools

Re: The Commissioner's Network School Initiative

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Governor Dannel P. Malloy's education budget proposals. I am writing in support of the Governor's proposals and more specifically, the Commissioner's Network School initiatives.

In line with Connecticut's vision for education reform, Norwich Public Schools was fortunate to have had one of its elementary schools, John B. Stanton Elementary School, selected as one of the Commissioner's Network Schools in July of 2012. Since that time, we have assembled a turnaround committee, developed our network plan with guidance from the SDE and begun the challenging work of implementation. It is for this reason that our school district is appreciative of the opportunity for our voice to be heard.

For John B. Stanton Elementary School, being a part of the Commissioner's Network of schools has afforded many benefits for our students in the form of essential human resources and monetary support. At Stanton Network School, we are six months into the implementation of our 3 year network plan. We are well underway with efforts to rebuild the foundation of our school. I would like to comment on our progress to date with the implementation of the network plan and our future vision. Please note that our plan is extensive and what I share below is a snapshot of highlights of our accomplishments to date.

At the heart of our network turnaround plan is a systematic process for rebuilding the family-school connection. We have used our resources to leverage expertise from Dr. Michele Femc-Bagwell, Director of ComPACT Schools at the University of Connecticut to lead us in developing parent ComPACTs in collaboration with our School Governance Council. We are also retaining Dr. Femc-Bagwell's services to collect meaningful and purposeful information from our parents through the ASPIRE program, a web-based database information system designed to collect parent information and determine how parents may best contribute to

our school environment. So far, we have collected information from 20% of our families and have created a timeline to continue expansion. Our Network School Bi-lingual Center, whose services support 23% of our school population, is staffed with a teacher and para educators who speak Spanish, Chinese and Haitian-Creole. Having the ability to hire bi-lingual staff to work with, and meet and greet students and their families on a daily basis has a significant impact on reducing our language barriers.

Stanton Network School is focused on enhancing the strength of our wraparound and outreach services to our school families. As a result we have opened a satellite office across town and select staff work regular weekly hours from that office to make ourselves more accessible to all families. As a result of leveraging our satellite office, we achieved a 94% participation rate for parent-student conferences in the fall. Additionally, our network plan and wrap around funding has made it possible for us to hire for the position of school family liaison, partnering with United Community and Family Services, whose main function is to expand the lines of communication with our parents and families and ensure we are best able to match services to families. Our parent liaison is currently participating in training for our Welcoming Walkthrough initiative set to be completed by the end of February. Betsy LeBorious, State Department of Education (SDE) will provide Welcome Walkthrough training for all School Governance Council (SGC) members and other parents/community members. Data is also being collected from teachers and parents to support this effort. Of further note with regards to our continued support of wrap-around services within the school system is that we have increased enrollment in our school-based health clinic by 11% so far this year. This is a partnership with Child & Family Agency of SE Connecticut.

The next major initiative we have undertaken is to partner with Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). As a national partner with a solid reputation for their research based approach to leading change within school systems across the country, McREL is training our staff in the adoption of a shared leadership model known as Success-In-Sight. Currently our staff is 5 months into their 2 year training. A leadership team has been established and the team is responsible for developing and delivering school-wide instructional initiatives to drive consistency of instructional practices building wide. Our staff has embraced writer's workshop as the vehicle to infuse the Common Core State Standards and elevate student achievement. We have completed our second fractal data collection and are in the process of implementing the third. We have seen student growth from fractal one to fractal two. This provides us with a clear focus on improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap.

Connecting to this partnership with McREL is the school's movement to utilize a computer-based benchmark testing system, or Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) from Northwest Evaluation Association. Stanton Network School completed its first round of testing to establish a baseline in January of 2012 and moving forward our plan is to utilize these benchmark tests in September, January and May of each school year. Tests are in alignment with common core state standards and will be used by staff to drive instruction as we move to transition our curriculum to align with the CCSS and prepare for the Smarter Balanced Assessment in 2015. Further still, efforts are underway in partnership with McREL to review a new reading program. Using a comprehensive rubric to evaluate leading programs, we are working to make a research-based decision on the purchase of a new reading program by the end of this school year. The next step in the process will be to then look at a new math program.

Another major contributor to maintaining the momentum of achieving the goals set forth in our network plan is the addition of staff. In the summer of 2012, 9 new staff members were added to our staff, 6 of which are new teachers requiring support to complete TEAM modules for beginning teachers. In addition, since mid-September we have hired 23 new

staff members, 10 of which are part time. Positions hired have included teachers, para educators, interventionists, library media support and data and literacy consultants. Please note that the position of interventionist has been added to provide additional small group instruction that targets the needs of all students under the SRBI model. It has been a huge undertaking to find, interview and select staff over the past 5 months, but at this point we are nearly fully staffed according to expectations set forth in our network plan. We are still in search of a math consultant and one classroom interventionist. This element of our network plan, the human resources is the largest element of change and we are underway with providing ongoing professional development and training to a brand new team of staff. The ability to staff with enough, highly qualified staff in specific roles, is a talent strategy that will have a lasting impact on our progress. I highlight this part of our work because just as it has been a huge undertaking to assemble a new team staff; it is also our largest expense and core reason for our plea for continued support. Staff at Stanton Network School work an additional hour each day as we move to systematically add instructional hours. Fully funding initiatives for Network Schools within the state is essential in order to provide increased instructional hours for our students as set forth in our plan and supported by the State Department of Education.

In closing, I would like to urge you to review the elements of our network plan. There are additional efforts underway that extend beyond the scope of highlights included in this letter. I also hope you will recognize the value in what we have accomplished to date and the diligence of our efforts. We are proud of our accomplishments and committed to full implementation of our network plan. However, we can only achieve our goals with your continued support. As you move forward with deliberations and core decisions around educational funding, it is our sincere hope that you agree to lend your continued support to our school, our district and the network school initiatives within the state. Moreover, I hope you choose to lend your support for the long-term benefit of our states public school children.

I submit this with sincere appreciation for your efforts on behalf of the Stanton Network School Staff, Students, Families and Network Turnaround Committee.