



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly – Education Committee
Testimony of Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor
February 15, 2013

Thank you Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Ackert, and members of the Education Committee. It is great to see you again after our discussion earlier this week.

On Wednesday, at your request, I provided a brief look at our significant progress implementing the numerous provisions of Public Act 12-116 – provisions that, together, we worked so hard on last legislative session.

My remarks today touch upon several of the bills you have raised for hearing. I look forward to continued discussion of these matters with the membership of this Committee over the course of the session.

The bills before you today implement the Governor's budget proposal for the coming biennium, deepening and expanding our commitment to improving our K-12 schools and our early childhood education system. As the Governor made clear in his speech to the General Assembly, we must invest in our priorities as a state and we believe that education should be one of those priorities.

House Bill 6357, An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor Concerning Education, renews and enhances our commitment to revitalizing struggling districts and schools. The bill reaffirms the Alliance Districts initiative, which provides accountability for new state education funding in the lowest-performing thirty districts – which include approximately forty percent of the state's students and faculty.

This year, we will focus the new increment of Alliance funding toward three levers for improving student outcomes: interventions in low-performing schools, implementation of the Common Core Standards, and assisting districts with educator evaluation and support. In addition, the Department will continue its partnership with Alliance Districts to oversee the implementation of the five-year plans set forth in 2012-13 applications.

The budget also provides funding for the state to support all districts in the rollout of educator evaluations and the Common Core. The proposal includes support for expanding the Commissioner's Network, the Governor's signature initiative for school turnaround; we are very pleased that six districts have volunteered for Network participation in the coming academic year and are in the process of working with local stakeholders to develop a turnaround plan to be submitted to the State Department of Education. And the proposal expands investments in public schools of choice.

I would like to speak to House Bill 6358, An Act Unleashing Innovation in Connecticut Schools. This bill is introduced to serve as a starting point for discussion of two distinct ideas: first, how we can elevate the teaching profession in Connecticut, and second, how we can support schools by removing unnecessary barriers to success.

I'd like to begin with section 4 of HB 6358, which we have put forward as a conceptual proposal. We know that teacher and leader quality is the most important in-school factor for student achievement. Our systems involved with school talent – for attracting, inducting, training, retaining, and developing the very best teaching talent in the country – must be world-class.

With section 4 of HB 6358, our intent is to seek the very best, most creative ideas from around the state to elevate, transform, and honor the profession of teaching in Connecticut. The SDE will incentivize districts to develop, in full cooperation and collaboration with their union, strategies that elevate and advance teaching. Teachers and administrators will be empowered to present and implement ideas that will strengthen the education professions in their districts. Ideas will arise from the grassroots. I look forward to discussing this concept further.

Section 3 of this bill emerged from the work of the Red Tape Review and Removal Task Force convened by Governor Malloy last year. The intent of this proposal is to enable high-performing districts – as well as the state's fastest-improving districts, and those districts showing greatest success in closing the achievement gap – to apply to the state for waivers from certain state mandates.

The philosophy behind this proposal is as follows. We seek a differentiated system – one where the SDE provides the greatest assistance, guidance, and structure to low-performing schools and districts. On the other hand, if a school or district is doing well – if its students are demonstrating high performance – we should be getting out of the way and devoting our scarce resources elsewhere.

This approach builds on much of our existing work. Our Alliance Districts and Commissioner's Network initiatives define certain low-performing schools and districts as those needing our greatest supports. Our ESEA waiver, created in response to federal guidance and approved by the U.S. Department of Education, classifies our schools based on performance. Section 3 of HB 6358 provides an additional step toward a differentiated system by giving greater autonomy and flexibility to our highest-performing and highest-progress districts.

I want to stress that HB 6358 is presented as a starting point for discussion. I look forward to continued collaborative discussions with the co-Chairs, ranking members, and entire Education Committee. We will also continue our dialogue with unions and stakeholder groups as we develop these proposals further and implement them together.

Thank you.