



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Ackert, and members of the Education Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to comment on legislative proposals before you today.

I would first like to express concerns regarding Senate Bill No. 1097, which would delay by one year the implementation of the state's teacher and school leader evaluation and support system, among other changes. I advocate instead that this committee follow the consensus roadmap set forth by the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, whose concept of a bridge year will provide districts with appropriate flexibility and resources as they continue to ramp up toward full implementation. PEAC's solution is the best path forward toward our shared goal of strengthening teaching, leading, and learning in our state.

As you know, the State Board's guidelines regarding educator evaluation were informed by the recommendations reached by consensus of the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, or PEAC, a stakeholder group comprised of both statewide teachers unions, representatives from state education organizations including CAPSS, CAS, and CABE, RESCs, and SDE staff.

We have received regular and invaluable feedback from the piloting of the evaluation model and from other districts as well. We have heard – loud and clear – concerns from districts across the state regarding the program's ambitious timeline for implementation. That is why, following numerous lead-up discussions, PEAC reconvened on February 4th to address these implementation concerns.

I believe that the consensus we reached on that day represents the best path forward. Districts would begin implementation in 2013-14, but do so with requisite flexibility and choice to ensure a successful rollout leading into full implementation in the 2014-15 school year. Any district availing itself of these flexibilities would engage in a committee process including representatives of district teachers and administrators. PEAC's plan lets each district act collaboratively to adjust its approach within the bridge year based on local context and circumstances. And our budget proposal provides support by absorbing certain significant costs at the state level – including data management, training and technical assistance, surveys, and assistance in creating a system of evaluation-informed professional learning.

PEAC's solution was adopted by consensus of its members, and passed unanimously by the State Board of Education. PEAC's members also unanimously affirmed their support of the rollout timeline and requested that no delay be authorized.

The bill's approach – postponing implementation by a year – would enable and encourage districts simply to put off this important work until 2014, instead of starting at whatever level the district is capable of before full implementation occurs. It would also jeopardize the state's compliance with our federally approved NCLB waiver, which requires statewide rollout of the evaluation and support system in 2013-14.

There are two other provisions of SB 1097 regarding which I wish to comment. First, the bill would change the role of district professional development committees to include evaluation. Specifically, the professional development committee would be involved in the selection of the evaluation model to be used by the district. The proposed bill requires that the professional development committee and the local or regional board of education for a district mutually agree on the selection of an evaluation model and specifies that the state model would be used by the district whenever mutual agreement between the local board of education and this committee is not reached. We believe there is value in the collaboration contemplated by this provision, but an unintended consequence is that the state model would be selected as the default even in cases where neither party wishes to proceed with it. For this reason, the local board of education should retain the final decisionmaking role. In addition, though the bill proposes that professional development committee for this activity, we suggest that local stakeholders select a committee for this purpose, so long as the committee includes representatives of district leadership and representatives of the bargaining unit.

Second, with regard to the reading assessment changes for teachers, the department has been meeting with the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus and other key stakeholders and has reached agreement on many issues. We support the language requiring kindergarten through grade 3 teachers to complete a survey of reading instruction to inform and enable professional development. In order to design and implement data-informed professional development that addresses a teacher's areas needing improvement, it is critical that the results of such survey be available to those educators providing support or guidance in the form of coaching, mentoring or supervision. The legislative language should be analyzed carefully and, as necessary, revised to ensure that this objective is achieved. And the question regarding who will assume the annual administration costs for the survey (districts, state, or teacher) is currently unanswered.

We support the bill's clarification that the test shall be administered at the pre-service level, prior to certification, for special educators and remedial reading teachers/consultants.

Another open question is which testing instrument should be used. The Foundations of Reading test focuses upon the elementary years. The bill requires K-12 special education applicants to take the test as well. We would request flexibility in determining which test, including potentially Foundations of Reading, is best suited for K-12 special education teachers.

I would also like to comment on SB 1096, An Act Concerning Governance of the State Education Resource Center. I believe it is crucial that we clarify SERC's legal status, and I support the bill's solution to this longstanding issue.

SERC has been in operation since 1969. Despite operating for over four decades, SERC has never had formal legal status.

Recently, the Education Department has sought to clarify this situation and to provide greater independence and accountability for SERC. In 2011, Raised Bill 1039 attempted to establish SERC as a not-for-profit entity.

This January, I submitted new legislation regarding SERC to the State Board of Education, which voted unanimously to approve it for consideration by this committee. The proposal specified that, among other changes, SERC should be governed by a board of directors; undergo periodic audits; report annually to the State Board of Education; and adopt and maintain transparent procedures concerning procurement, personnel, and budgeting.

My goal with this proposal was to grant SERC the independence and accountability measures it needs to operate with the confidence of this legislature and the education community.

Since then, we have continued to refine our proposal to achieve this goal. My March 4th letter to this committee, following the Auditors of Public Accounts' Interim Audit Report, suggested revisions to CSDE's original bill. The bill you are considering today shares numerous commonalities with our suggestions, including organizing SERC as a quasi-public agency with governance by an independent board; adopting competitive bidding procedures applicable to state agencies; requiring annual compliance audits by the Auditors of Public Accounts; and presentation of annual reports to the General Assembly.

I support this bill, and look forward to working with you to advance it.

I offer two additional points. First, the original SDE proposal specified that SERC should be subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. There is no such explicit provision in SB 1096. Given the importance of public access to information, I believe the bill should include the FOIA provision contained in the original SDE proposal. And second, I look forward to continued discussions regarding section 2(b) – we are concerned that insufficient clarity may

exist regarding the proposed Connecticut School Reform Resource Center, which should be subject to all of the rules being applied to SERC itself.

HB 6622, An Act Concerning District Partnerships, is also important. Currently Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven participate in a pilot where charter schools located in those districts may work with a local district to create an agreement whereby in exchange for support or resources, districts may count the academic performance of charter school students in their district performance measures. The Department supports expanding eligibility to include all alliance districts, and we are therefore supportive of the proposal.

As you know, the State of Connecticut has adopted the Common Core State Standards, and districts have begun transitioning to Common Core-aligned curricula. In the spring of 2015, the State will move from administering the Connecticut Mastery Tests and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test to administering Common Core-aligned assessments authored by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. HB 6623, An Act Concerning Student Assessments, begins to make the changes necessary to allow for this transition to take place, by defining "mastery evaluation" as examinations approved by the State Board of Education to measure essential and grade-appropriate skills in reading, writing, mathematics and science. This flexibility is essential in being able to administer Common Core-aligned assessments. However, the Department has concerns with certain language in this proposal, specifically regarding testing in grade ten and eleven. We look forward to further discussing those concerns.

Thank you.