



**STATE OF CONNECTICUT**  
*STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION*



Connecticut General Assembly – Appropriations Committee  
Testimony of Commissioner Stefan Pryor  
February 24, 2014

Thank you Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Miner, and members of the Appropriations Committee for the opportunity to review the Department of Education's proposed budget adjustments for Fiscal Year 2015 (FY 15).

Our Department has made significant progress implementing our education reform initiatives – provisions that we worked on together for the benefit of Connecticut's students.

My remarks today highlight how these budget adjustments continue to advance our reform efforts – aiming to ensure that all Connecticut students have access to a quality education to prepare them for college, careers, and life. I look forward to discussion of these matters with the membership of this Committee today and over the course of the session.

I am grateful to Governor Malloy – for his commitment to education and his leadership in this area. I applaud his work in ensuring the budget continues to make education a top priority for Connecticut.

This proposal continues to have a strong focus on education through increased ECS funding – a \$40 million increase as approved last year by the General Assembly and signed by Governor Malloy.

We are particularly pleased that the largest amount of the ECS funding increase is for the Alliance Districts. This investment renews and enhances our commitment to revitalizing high-need 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.

The Governor's proposed budget adjustments include several highlights that are important to our Department:

- Continued funding for the Commissioner's Network initiative. With 11 schools now participating in the Commissioner's Network, and progress underway for the third cohort of schools beginning in the 2014-15 school year, we are pleased that the budget adjustments maintain funding for this important turnaround initiative. Commissioner's Network schools have seen increases in staff and student attendance, decreases in student behavior problems, instruction improvement, and increased excitement and enthusiasm for learning. Continued funding will allow SDE to bring these changes to more Connecticut students.

- Affirming our commitment to the Alliance Districts, by continuing to allocate increased dollars to these districts. This year, we focused the new increment of Alliance funding toward three levers for improving student outcomes: assisting districts with educator evaluation and support, implementation of the Common Core Standards and interventions in low-performing schools. In the coming year, we will be working with districts to focus further on K-3 reading as part of their Alliance Districts plans, and will be engaging district leaders and community partners in a collaborative table top exercise to provide further focus on wraparound services. We have also been working closely with Alliance Districts through quarterly convenings to review relevant student data, ensuring that as districts develop their Year 3 plans, there is a focus on data-based decision making.
- Talent Development funds. In this budget, funds in the Basic Skills Exam Teachers in Training and Teachers' Standards Implementation Program (TEAM) are consolidated into the Talent Development line item. The CSDE Talent Office is working to train, recruit, develop, support, and advance teachers throughout their career. This consolidation of funding acknowledges the combined, integrated nature of this work. While there is an overall decrease of funding in this area, the funding will allow us to continue the essential supports to districts as we implement the educator evaluation and support system statewide. As districts work on this important initiative, the Department remains firm in our commitment to provide the resources – staff expertise, data management, training, and more – that districts need in order to be successful. Funding for 2014-15 will allow the Department to continue to support the efforts we have made this year to provide for training, evaluator proficiency and calibration, a data management system, teacher support through the Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), and technical assistance to district leaders and teachers. This support for districts is essential as we move forward with this work.
- Common Core implementation. The line item approved for the second year of the biennium remains the same, although this is nearly a \$2 million decrease from the current fiscal year. We are working directly with Common Core District Coaches and groups of teachers – providing resources and training around the shift to Common Core State Standards. We have also launched a Community of Practice – a facilitated discussion for district leaders to discuss challenges and solutions around implementing the Common Core. And we have launched a Common Core website: [ctcorestandards.org](http://ctcorestandards.org). This budget further supports technology investments in Common Core and other areas of educational innovation by allocating \$10 million in technology funding for Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The Governor will be convening a task force of stakeholders to further examine the implementation of Common Core State Standards and look into further ways we can support this initiative.
- This budget also makes a substantial investment in our Connecticut Technical High School System (CTHSS). As you know, J.M. Wright will re-open this year. This supports staffing and other needs associated with that opening. Additionally, this new funding will support facility maintenance as well as health and safety positions within our technical high schools.
- We are also pleased that the budget provides necessary resources to support the Sheff v. O'Neill Phase 3 settlement. In December of 2013 the state, plaintiffs, and City of Hartford reached an agreement that included the conversion of a Hartford public school to a magnet school; the development of a new Hartford magnet school in collaboration

with Capital Community College; the development of part-time and summer programs; the transformation of a neighborhood school into a new Sheff Lighthouse school; and a new desegregation standard. This budget supports these continued efforts towards desegregation.

- It is important to note the \$1 million reduction in the magnet school line item. While this reduction is in the administrative set-aside and can be absorbed by the agency, we anticipate a significant deficit -- perhaps \$35 million -- for operations and transportation associated with Magnet Schools. The projected need for this funding is not yet addressed in this budget, though we have assurances from OPM that this issue will be further examined and addressed in the course of the budget process.
- Finally, this budget includes an important capital investment for the safety of Connecticut's students, teachers, and school staff. Last year, as part of an effort to respond to the tragic events at Sandy Hook, \$15 million was allocated to assist districts in improving safety measures at their schools. We must do all we can to ensure our students -- and our teachers -- are safe in their schools. This year, the budget includes a new \$10 million investment to improve school safety further. Importantly, it includes schools that were not eligible under last year's funding -- our technical high schools, RESC-operated schools, and public charter schools.. We strongly support this additional funding as we continue to work with Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP) and the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) to ensure safe learning environments for Connecticut students.

I would also like to take this opportunity to note that while our agency focuses on K-12 education, under Governor Malloy's leadership we are working closely with partner agencies to ensure a full P-20 system for Connecticut students. With the new Office of Early Childhood and important efforts toward universal Pre-K, we are helping ensure that all students are on a path to success. With continued efforts to improve access to our state's system of higher education, we are helping students be further prepared for college, career, and life.

As we work together on these important initiatives, it is critical that we allocate the necessary resources. I am confident that with this proposed budget, we have the resources to move forward in reaching high standards and enhancing educational opportunities for all of our children.

We will be happy to answer any questions. Thank you.