STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Education Committee
Testimony of Commissioner Stefan Pryor
March 3, 2014

Sen. Stillman, Rep. Fleischmann, Sen. Boucher, Rep. Ackert, and members of the Education Committee. Thank you for offering the opportunity to share some thoughts with you on a number of the bills on your agenda.

SB 25: AA Establishing the Office of Early Childhood and SB 26: AA Expanding Opportunities for Early Childhood Education

The Department offers strong support for both of these proposals. When the Governor and we at the State Department of Education articulated our education reform agenda back in 2011, we organized our agenda under six principles. The very first principle was, "Enhance families' access to early childhood education." We are pleased with the progress that we, in full partnership with the General Assembly, have made regarding early childhood investments to date. And we very much support continuing work and investment in this area. While the Office of Early Childhood operates as a separate entity, the State Department of Education is pleased to serve as the OEC's administrative home and is therefore pleased to offer support for the Office in the way of fiscal, legal, personnel and other services. 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 on a path to success.

HB 5043: AA Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor Concerning Education

This legislation primarily implements the provisions of the Phase 3 Sheff stipulation as agreed to by the plaintiffs and the State. It is essential that this stipulation be implemented in order to allow the Department to carry out the agreed upon work. Among this work is a new feature – the lighthouse school – which aims to help the Hartford Board of Education turn around a neighborhood school, and through that work, stabilize the surrounding community and strengthen the diversity of the area. The Department strongly supports this legislation and is committed to carrying out the associated work as we move forward.

HB 5355: AAC Collaboration Between Boards of Education and School Resource Officers

As with last year's legislation concerning this issue, the Department of Education favors this proposed legislation.

One of our objectives in the post-Sandy Hook period has been to support local efforts to enhance school safety and security while also advocating such efforts benefit from best practices and are undertaken thoughtfully. We aim to ensure that, when schools are justifiably fortified, we do not unintentionally create fortresses that no longer function in ways that are educationally sound. This legislative proposal aims to build upon the successes of similar programs in 13 districts across the state by requiring any district with a School Resource Officer to enter into a Memorandum of Agreement with their local police department. This MOA will lay out the appropriate response for various student discipline issues within the school. In districts that have already put such a model in place, results have been reported including decreases in cases unnecessarily or inappropriately being referred to juvenile court, and progress being made in the disproportionate contact law enforcement personnel had with minority students.

Expanding this program statewide will require all districts to look carefully at how they handle discipline issues and develop an MOA, part of which will include a graduated response model. Many times school discipline issues can be handled within the school, rather than being referred to court. We are confident that the State has resources to assist districts in this work. The Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC) has model policies and MOAs, districts currently doing this work can serve as resources, some federal funds are available to support districts, and the Child Health and Development Institute (CHDI) is currently preparing school response tool kits for districts.

The inclusion of information concerning school-based arrests in strategic school profiles will also provide important data to allow us to track progress of school-based arrests, and continue to address this important issue. The Department is supportive of providing aggregate school-based arrest data in the Strategic School Profile. Disaggregating the data for all schools and districts will result in a vast majority of the data being suppressed due to data confidentially requirements. The Department understands the need for these data to be disaggregated to inform policy and focus intervention strategies, and will be able to do so through our Public School Information System as the legislation proposes.

We look forward to the ongoing and expanded partnership this proposal creates between our Department, the Judicial Branch, and the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection

HB 5357: AAC Chronic Absenteeism

We certainly agree that this is a critical issue we must continue working on together. While we support additional work on this topic, we think this requires further conversation before we can support this legislation as written. This proposal presents an additional mandate for districts, and we would like to engage with districts in a thoughtful dialogue about how to best address these issues so that any proposed legislation would produce the desired outcomes.

The Department is engaging in significant work around this issue:

- Charlene Russell-Tucker, our Chief Operating Officer, is co-chairing the Children's Report Card Strategic Action Group on chronic absenteeism. This group is comprised of knowledgeable and experienced stakeholders, including districts seeing improvement in that area of work, to assess trends; identify best practices; develop proposed strategies for "turning the curve" and help oversee their implementation. A holistic approach to address this issue is critical as solutions to high levels of chronic absenteeism will require the collaborative efforts of schools, communities, and families.

- Beginning May 2013, the CSDE analyzed chronic absenteeism at the state, district and school levels. Connecticut data from 2011-12 showed that 11 percent of all K-12 students are chronically absent. The results also confirmed that significant disparities exist among student subgroups including race, poverty, language barriers, special needs and urban students. Additionally, the CSDE data system provides customized reports to each district that can be used in local district efforts to reduce absenteeism.

- To highlight the importance of reducing chronic absenteeism, the CSDE and the Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap, chaired by the Lieutenant Governor, convened a statewide conference to focus on the latest research and strategies to remove barriers to student attendance. This conference, *Using a School-Linked Services Approach to Solve Chronic Absence,* stressed the importance of connecting families to nonacademic services through school partnerships with community organizations to eliminate barriers to attendance. Attention was given to issues related to social, emotional and physical health.

- Student attendance and teacher attendance are key data points for Commissioner's Network and Alliance District schools. We are closely monitoring attendance at these schools, and helping districts respond to chronically absent students in appropriate ways.

- In collaboration with the Interagency Council on Ending the Achievement Gap, the SDE has undertaken an initiative on wrap around services to support districts in ensuring that families and students have access to needed community based programs and services that will better position them for academic success. At the local level, 11 communities and their school districts have begun to track and monitor chronic absenteeism data using the District Attendance Tracking Tool, developed by Attendance Works. The Graustein Memorial Fund, in partnership with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, has provided support and technical assistance and is building a peer learning network.

It is important to acknowledge that truly addressing this issue will take thoughtful, planful actions centered around schools, students and families. The Department is supportive of continued work in this area with the many partners interested and currently engaged in this topic. We are certainly open to further conversation, a deeper look at the data, and a more thoughtful planning process around chronic absenteeism.