



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee
Testimony of Commissioner Stefan Pryor
March 12, 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.

I would like to focus my spoken remarks on HB 5078 and HB 5331, the Common Core and evaluation bills.

Committee members, the debate about the Common Core in Connecticut should be about how best to prepare for the future by moving forward rather than how to defend the past while moving backward. Together, we should be finding new and better ways to help our districts, schools, teachers, and students with the transition to the new standards, not prohibiting the state from providing assistance precisely when such support is needed.

The Common Core is fundamentally about preparing our children for their futures: in college, in careers, and in life.

Looking to our colleges, over 70% of the state's community college students require remediation, as well as nearly 20% of students entering the Board of Regents' state universities. Higher, college-aligned standards can better prepare our current students for their futures in college – and help leave behind the past of students and families going into debt just to receive remediation.

How about careers? Two-thirds of Connecticut businesses that are seeking new employees report that they are having trouble finding qualified workers for their businesses. Now, while not every job requires that a worker be a college graduate, the jobs of the future will in fact require increased preparation: by 2020, 70% of our state's jobs will require postsecondary education.

Connecticut's past academic standards, the Connecticut Frameworks, were adopted in 1998. The Connecticut Mastery Test was first developed even earlier, in 1985. These previous standards are not making the grade -- as evidenced by the problematic results at the college and career level that I've just outlined.

The nation is moving forward into the era of college- and career-ready standards. 45 states have adopted the Common Core. Just last week, the College Board announced that the SAT college admission exam would be redesigned to better align with college and career ready standards. Do we in Connecticut want to be left behind as other states move in this direction? We risk harming our students if we hold them back – requiring them to remain in a bygone era.

The changes we are seeking in Connecticut's schools are important – and, yes, they are difficult. That's why we've worked hard to ensure that there's a transition period for educators and students – **one that involves low stakes and high support**. This year, we deliberately gave districts the choice of which state test to use – the old or the new – and removed the stakes from the Smarter Balanced test for two years so that teachers and districts have time to adjust. No tie to teacher evaluation for two years. No changes to school classifications in the accountability system. No connection to high school graduation requirements. **By the time we reach 2015-16**

and the new tests count for any of these purposes, Connecticut will have had nearly six years of transition time. That's since 2010, when the Common Core standards were adopted.

The state has a big role to play to help with the transition to the Common Core. Already, we've brought together over 1,500 teachers from 163 districts to train them as coaches equipped to train their colleagues, and we are recruiting teachers for "The Connecticut Dream Team" to serve as Common Core ambassadors for other teachers. More direct trainings are on the way for spring and summer. In the meantime, we've launched CTCoreStandards.org, an online resource of sample unit and lesson plans for teachers and leaders to access around the clock. Thanks to the Governor and this General Assembly, this was the first year that included a line item in the budget to support such efforts. These trainings are just the beginning; there is undoubtedly more to do. We will work closely with Governor Malloy's just-appointed Common Core educators' taskforce to find meaningful ways to improve our supports for school districts. We hope the taskforce can assist us in further developing ways to help especially those districts that have gaps in their readiness – so we can target our support, working together with RESCs and even enabling districts to partner with one another.

A few brief remarks on HB 5331. The changes to educator evaluations proposed in this bill are unnecessary, since PEAC is empowered to modify the evaluation system guidelines in consultation with the State Board of Education. Worse, it cements in statute key rules regarding which districts have sought flexibility. Perhaps unintentionally but definitively, this bill therefore reduces their options. For example, some districts are moving in the direction of using multiple, shorter, informal observations – this bill would make such locally developed ideas impossible.

Honorable members of this committee, as our young people consider their goals and aspirations for the future, they seek to meet the requirements of the colleges and the workplaces they'll be entering. What will we do to help them? Will we shirk our responsibility, defensively holding on to the past and refusing to embrace the future? Or will we demonstrate Connecticut's commitment to our students' success, marshal our resources, and do what it takes to prepare our young people for what's ahead? The challenges our young people face – Common Core or no Common Core – will not simply go away if we ignore them or debate them. These challenges are real. Colleges are demanding more than we're currently delivering. Employers are doing the same. Let's show our students we're not going to run from these challenges and hope they disappear. And let's show that we will not hold local communities and educators back by senselessly prohibiting the flow of needed resources. Instead, let's step up our supports and strengthen our commitment to our schools, teachers, and students.

HB 5520: AAC the Availability of an On-line Study Skills Curriculum

We would like to take this opportunity to express the view that districts are already overburdened and, while study skills are important to future success, encouraging districts to offer specific curriculum topics is another mandate at a time when they are already overburdened. The Department would prefer that this legislation not move forward at this time.

SB 425: AAC the State Education Resource Center

The Department appreciates the Committee's further consideration of this important subject. Per the General Assembly's request, since last session, we have undertaken additional examination of the State Education Resource Center and its roles and interactions with the Department. This study was submitted to the Committee in January. As required by statute, revisions to the report were submitted at the beginning of this month, including a legislative proposal to transition SERC to a quasi-public agency.

HB 5523: AA Establishing a Task Force to Study Paraprofessional Staffing Levels

The Department supports the creation of this task force. Paraprofessionals serve in a critical role in our schools and this task force will provide a forum to study issues related to these key school staff members. We request that this task coordinate with our existing Paraprofessional Advisory Council.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions.