STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee
Testimony of Commissioner Stefan Pryor
March 17, 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 regret that I cannot join you today, but am certainly open to further dialogue around any of these issues.

HB 5563: An Act Concerning the Technical High School System and Agricultural Science and Technology Education Centers

Acknowledging that the Technical High School System now has its own governing board, we would appreciate the Committee's support for this legislation, which would permit the new board to oversee the reports submitted by the CTHSS system. We further appreciate the fact that the Committee is considering our proposal allowing the technical high schools to be eligible for all grant opportunities other public schools are open to.

SB 472: An Act Concerning State Funding For Education and the Budgets of Boards of Education

The Department appreciates the Committee's willingness to raise the minor, though important, language in the initial six sections. This will allow payments to proceed to districts for a number of grants as intended.

We would like to discuss the language in section 7 delaying the implementation of the Uniform Chart of Accounts. We believe this language may be unnecessary as we have been working diligently with stakeholders to ensure that in the first year – a transition year – the collection is not burdensome for districts, but will still provide us with necessary information to continue improving the system. In this first year we are asking districts to upload information in the way they always have, and we are making adjustments on our end to align the system accordingly. We join you in a commitment to relieve districts of burdens and mandates, and are open to a further dialogue on this issue.

SB 473: An Act Concerning Magnet Schools

The language in section 1 requiring magnet operators to notify parents of lottery results makes sense. We think this information is important for parents to be able to plan appropriately. We would note that the language in section 2 does not yet fully address our concerns around this issue. We have attached language submitted to the Committee, and ask that you consider substituting that language so that the Sheff Phase 3 settlement can be appropriately implemented.

SB 476: An Act Concerning the Academic Achievement Gap

The Department is supportive of opportunities for extended learning time for students, especially in our Alliance Districts and including full-day kindergarten. Of the 30 Alliance Districts, only 3 do not currently have full-day kindergarten. Several Alliance Districts have already chosen to use their additional funds to implement full-day kindergarten in their districts, so while this language may not be necessary, we are not opposed to it.

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We would also like to request the chance to discuss the extension of bilingual services for students to 60 months from the current 36 months. We join with you in support of strengthening services to English language learners. However, it's already the case that bilingual educators are a shortage area, and requiring additional time for students in this program would mean that we would need even more teachers to fulfill this goal.

HB 5561: An Act Concerning State and Local Charter School Accountability and Transparency and Participation in Cooperative Arrangements

We thank the Committee for raising the language approved by our State Board of Education regarding this subject. We think it is of vital importance that state and local charters be treated equally as pertains to their accountability and transparency. This legislation now ensures that local charter schools will be expected to follow the same accountability and transparency procedures regarding the posting of public information, chances for random annual financial audit, and the opportunity for cooperative agreements.

HB 5564: An Act Concerning School Safety

We appreciate this committee's continued attention to two important, and related, topics – school safety and school climate.

There are two new programs contemplated in this proposal – one creating a safe route to school program, and one creating a student safety line through United Way's 2-1-1. We are supportive of these concepts, but are concerned that there is not funding in the budget for either proposal. We would also welcome the opportunity to partner with the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection on these projects as a collaborating agency.

We would also like to comment on the new language regarding school climate plans. In our 2014 report to the General Assembly on school climate, one of our recommendations was to provide the Department with the authority to conduct reviews of the safe school climate plans (rather than just the authority to receive such plans). Additionally, we recommended an annual school climate survey (to begin in 2016 out of acknowledgement of the current administrative burdens upon districts), pilots in the area of social-emotional development for students, and updating the charge of the safe school climate committees to better focus on creating a positive school climate. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our observations and proposals in greater depth at a future point in time.

We are pleased to report that the Department has already engaged in some of the work this legislation suggests – i.e. the review of safe school climate plans submitted by districts. Already, we have reviewed submitted plans against minimum criteria, and we have notified districts as to the status of their plans accordingly. Formalizing our implicit authority to review plans via an explicit statutory provision is welcome. We believe it is important that districts review feedback and improve plans that do not appear to meet minimum requirements. However, we would like to discuss the provision requiring the adoption of a model plan for districts that do not meet this requirement, as suggested in the proposed legislation. Each district has unique needs, and a single model plan would likely not address such varied local needs. However, we would welcome language requiring an iterative process with districts, or enabling the Department to provide technical assistance in order to enable districts to meet minimum guidelines.

HB 5566: An Act Concerning Minor Revisions to the Education Statutes

The Department would request further conversation regarding the change in language from Special Master to Turnaround Specialist. We are receptive to revising this language to ensure that the title best captures the meaning of this role but would like to discuss the precise terminology. We would also like to note that our State Board of Education and the Windham Board of Education recently reached a resolution concerning the transition out of the special master arrangement in that district. We want to ensure this new language will not conflict with that agreement, and welcome the opportunity to address all aspects of this language change further with the committee.

HB 5567: An Act Concerning Alternative Schools

The Department welcomes the opportunity to further address alternative schools in Connecticut. At the direction of this Committee, the Department engaged in a study of alternative schools over the past year. That study was submitted to this Committee, and we are pleased that several recommendations are incorporated into this legislation. Conceptually, we agree with this legislation and think it helps to ensure that alternative schools are a quality part of the educational system. We think it is critical to have better data and information on these programs, and we highlighted that need in our report. This legislation would lead to more information on students and staff, facilities, and academic progress. We believe this is a positive development.

Our report also highlights the discrepancies between programs. We welcome the opportunity for the state to create guidelines for these programs, and are committed to working with stakeholders to ensure comprehensive, thoughtful guidelines that address student and staff needs.

We also commend the committee for defining alternative school programs. We are, however, concerned with one section of that definition, which requires these programs to adhere to sections 10-15, 10-16, and 10-16b – requiring the same curriculum and hours in a school day as all other schools. While we certainly acknowledge the need for quality educational opportunities for all students, we are concerned that in some cases, students who are attending an alternative school program benefit from a different experience – involving, for example, a different curriculum or differing hours. We would encourage the committee to amend this language so that the guidelines developed for alternative school programs allow for such flexibility rather than requiring conformance with these specific clauses. And, given both the importance and complexity of this subject, we would suggest that we collectively engage in further consultation with local district administrators of alternative school programs regarding their feedback on any more detailed requirements under considerations before we place such requirements in statute.

SR 7 and HR 4: Resolution Approving the Settlement Agreement in Sheff V. O'Neill

We would like to offer brief testimony encouraging your support of both resolutions. Your approval would confirm the Department's ability to move forward with the implementation of the phase 3 agreement as agreed to by the plaintiffs and the State. It is important 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 enhance the performance of and provide for the better positioning of a neighborhood school – and, through that work, help stabilize the surrounding area and strengthen diversity within the community. The Department supports these resolutions and is committed to carrying out the associated work as we move forward.

Language for SB 473 Section 2:

Section 197 of Public Act 11-48 is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof:

(a) An interdistrict magnet school program that is not in compliance with the racial minorities enrollment requirements of section 10-264*l* of the general statutes, as amended by this act, following the submission of student information data [of] **for** such program to the state-wide public school information system, pursuant to section 10-10a of the general statutes, on or before October 1, [2012] **2013**, and October 1, [2013] **2014**, due to **(1)** changes in the 2010 federal racial reporting requirements of racial and ethnic data, as described in the Federal Register of October 19, 2007, **and (2) the adoption of a new statewide definition of diversity under section 10-264i**, shall maintain such program's status as an interdistrict magnet school program and remain eligible for an interdistrict magnet school operating grant pursuant to section 10-264*l* of the general statutes, as amended by this act, if such program submits a compliance plan to the Commissioner of Education and the Commissioner approves such plan.

(b) On or before January 1, [2013] **2015**, the Department of Education shall submit to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, recommendations for legislation to amend the racial minorities enrollment requirements for interdistrict magnet school programs pursuant to section 10-264*l* of the general statutes, as amended by this act, to conform with changes in the federal law. Such plan shall reflect the regional demographics of the interdistrict magnet school programs and the diverse racial, ethnic and socio-economic needs of the student populations attending interdistrict magnet school programs.