STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee
Testimony of Interim Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell
February 25, 2015

Thank you Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle, and members of the Education Committee. First, to those I have not yet had the opportunity to meet, my name is Dianna Wentzell, Interim Commissioner of the Department of Education. Previous to taking on the interim post, I served as Chief Academic Officer at the Department since November 2012.

I appreciate the opportunity to briefly touch upon several bills on your agenda today, and I look forward to continued discussion with members of the committee moving forward this session.

Items one through four on the agenda would implement the Governor's budget proposal for the biennium, and would build upon substantial gains we've made in bolstering K-12 education in Connecticut. Despite difficult budgetary choices, education remains a clear priority. Therefore, I offer my strong support for the Governor's proposals, detailed below.

Senate Bill 942, An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the Governor Concerning Education would, as the Governor outlined in his speech to the General Assembly last week, level fund statutory entitlements for education, while making other conforming and technical changes.

Of note, the bill increases – from two, currently, to eight – the number of schools eligible from a single district for inclusion in the Commissioner's Network structure. The Commissioner's Network, which directs additional resources and transformative strategies to struggling schools, is a promising model designed to further close the achievement gap in our state. By increasing the number of schools eligible, a district can leverage practices and personnel and bring successful models to scale more efficiently.

Senate Bill 943, An Act Concerning Charter School Modernization and Reform seeks to update and modernize charter school statutory provisions. This proposal is a smart and thoughtful improvement to existing statutes that raises accountability and increases transparency and oversight, while providing the necessary flexibility to nurture innovation. Promising practices that emerge through this innovation would be shared with local school districts, fostering stronger communication between charter schools and local districts. This bill raises the bar for expected outcomes by establishing academic and organizational performance targets. All charter management organizations would be explicitly required to be not-for-profit entities and all contracts would need State Board of Education approval. Furthermore, the bill would codify and reinforce certain administrative actions undertaken by the Department at Governor Malloy's direction in July 2014, including: 1) strengthening accountability measures in charter

school operations and student performance; 2) setting explicit requirements for charter management organizations; 3) requiring the adoption of anti-nepotism and conflict of interest policies; and 4) broadening background check requirements.

Senate Bill 944, An Act Establishing A Full-Day Kindergarten Requirement would expand the state's commitment to early learning by establishing full-day kindergarten experiences as the standard throughout Connecticut. The overwhelming majority of Connecticut school districts have moved in this direction on their own. In our efforts to close the achievement gap, full-day kindergarten can no longer be viewed as a luxury, but as a necessity.

House Bill 6837, An Act Encouraging A Graduated Response Model For Discipline would build upon the success of similar programs in some Connecticut districts by requiring districts with school resource officers to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with their local law enforcement agencies. The MOU would outline applicable responses for various student discipline issues within the school. Early results in districts that have established graduated response models for student discipline are promising, with reports of a decrease in unnecessary and inappropriate referrals to juvenile court. The bill would also add school-based arrest, suspension, and expulsion data to published strategic school profile reports.

Concerning two other proposals on today's agenda:

House Bill 6835, An Act Concerning English Language Learners would require school districts to provide formal programs of bilingual education to more students and increase – from 30 to 60 months – the time a student may spend in a program of bilingual education. We are supportive of the intentions of this bill, however, we are concerned that these expansions, as drafted, would result in significant added costs to school districts. As a more direct, impactful, and efficient course, the Department would suggest enhanced training and support of recognized models and best practices for delivery of English as a Second Language curricula, as well as amendments, similar to the Department's legislative proposal, to current certification statutes that encourage teachers to seek bilingual teacher endorsements, an identified teacher shortage area. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Education Committee on this issue to ensure our English language learners receive the supports they need to succeed.

House Bill 6834, An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Board Of Education And School Resource Officers offers language similar to House Bill 6837, An Act Encouraging A Graduated Response Model For Discipline. The Department believes, however, that the definition of school-based arrests in HB 6837 allows the Department to better capture data that can be used to target effective interventions. The Department would further caution that collecting disaggregated data for school-based arrests for all schools and districts, as called for in HB 6834, would result in a vast majority of the data being suppressed due to confidentiality requirements. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Education Committee to develop language that accomplishes our shared goals in this area.