



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT *STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION*



**Connecticut General Assembly  
Education Committee  
Testimony of Interim Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell  
March 11, 2015**

Thank you Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle, and members of the Education Committee. For the record, I am Dianna Wentzell, Interim Commissioner at the Department of Education.

It is my pleasure to be back before you to touch on several proposed bills on today's agenda.

First, **House Bill No. 6980, An Act Concerning The Timing Of Teacher Performance Evaluations** and **Senate Bill No. 1057, An Act Concerning The Development Of A Rolling Three-Year Capital Improvement And Capital Equipment Plan For The Technical High School System**, are agency submitted proposals. I would like to thank the Committee for raising both for consideration.

**House Bill 6980** is the result of feedback received concerning the state's system of educator evaluation and support. The proposal before you reflects our continued partnership with school districts. It offers additional flexibility with end of academic year data reporting to boards of education and the timeline for state approval of educator evaluation and support plans, including their subsequent adoption and implementation at the local level.

Over the past two years, we have heard that the June 1 deadline to report end of year summative evaluation data to local or regional boards of education – currently in statute – does not provide school and district administrators sufficient time to complete their full evaluation cycle, which includes end of year conferences with educators where a summative rating is provided. Currently, all summative ratings must be reported to boards of education by June 1, and to the Commissioner of Education by June 30. In many districts, however, end of year meetings run right up to the very end of the academic year. This proposal would move the board report requirement to June 30 and reporting to the Commissioner of Education to September 15.

Similarly, the process concerning district submission of their evaluation and support plans to the Department is an iterative one. In the case where plan revisions may need to be reconsidered by local Professional Development and Evaluation Committees and the local or regional board of education – an increasingly difficult task when school is not in session – we are seeking additional time, from September 1 to October 15, for local or regional boards of education to adopt their state-approved educator evaluation and support plans.

Districts continue to implement their teacher evaluation and support plans with impressive commitment and fidelity. The Department believes this additional flexibility will enhance these efforts.

**Senate Bill 1057** is a request from the Connecticut Technical High School System which is doing excellent work preparing students for both college and career. This proposal would require the CTHSS to prepare and submit an annual, rolling three year capital plan, rather than one single plan every five years, as is currently in statute. Given the rapid pace of emerging technologies, the Department believes projecting capital needs once every five years is unrealistic, and strongly supports this statutory change.

Other proposals on today's agenda that I would like to offer brief testimony:

**Senate Bill No. 1058, An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism**, is an area that the CSDE has elevated statewide through State Board of Education policy, including implementation of a planning requirement for Alliance Districts that is consistent with thresholds specified in the proposal.

A child's absence can thwart even the best teaching and learning environments. While the CSDE supports the intent of the proposal, we would caution against a one-size-fits-all approach that is heavy on prescription over function. Districts making gains in this important area have effectively leveraged staff and resources around a locally-conceived plan that best fits their needs and community. We are prepared to continue to offer technical assistance in these efforts.

**Senate Bill No. 1053, An Act Prohibiting Out-Of-School Suspensions And Expulsions For Students In Preschool And Grades Kindergarten To Two** concerns a topic of great importance. In fact, the Department annually presents an analysis of statewide data to the State Board of Education. This information is tracked and monitored as part of the Alliance District, Commissioner's Network and charter school accountability systems.

Taken in the aggregate, suspensions of young children are a concern. Regarding the discipline data, it is important to clarify that no students under the age of seven were expelled in the previous two years and that the data represents only in-school and out-of-school suspensions. The CSDE would caution moving towards rigid mandates that eliminate local discretion having to do with discipline. Teachers and school professionals know their children best, and are responsible to ensure the safety of the school environment for all students. If a student harms or poses a danger to other students, the school is obligated to remove that student to ensure the safety of other students and of the educators, regardless of the age of the student. The discipline data shows that 59 percent of students under seven years of age who receive in-school or out-of-school suspensions for fighting, threatening behavior, and for physical and verbal confrontation. On the whole, these types of incidents account for 27 percent of the total suspensions and expulsions of the entire student population.

We understand and share the concern around the increase of young students who are being suspended. However, our educators do not take discipline measures lightly. The CSDE will continue to support districts with technical assistance to ensure that student needs are identified early and appropriate interventions are given prior to an emergency situation. We welcome continued discussion designed to reduce – and eliminate – suspensions for our youngest learners.

**House Bill No. 6974, An Act Implementing The Recommendations Of The Achievement Gap Task Force Concerning The Creation Of A Director Of Reading Initiatives At The Department Of Education** is a proposal that the CSDE is in the process of addressing. The reading position has been posted and can be viewed via our website. The closing date for candidate submissions is April 1, 2015; we hope to have the position filled within the next couple of months. Therefore, we do not believe legislation is necessary.

**Senate Bill No. 1056 An Act Concerning The Excess Cost Threshold And The Collection Of Data Relating To Per Pupil Costs For Special Education**, as proposed, raises concerns regarding new data reporting requirements that would substantially increase burden at the local level and the state level. Special education costs can have significant impact on local education budgets. We would welcome the opportunity to continue a dialogue with the General Assembly during the legislative session to ensure that we help alleviate some burden and find efficiencies for our districts while honoring our commitment for an inclusive, quality education for our students with disabilities.

**House Bill No. 6976, An Act Concerning A Study Of Recovery High Schools** proposes a study of high schools designed to serve students recovering from substance abuse. Currently, the CSDE is substantially involved in a standing committee that is examining alternative schools. Current work may already align with this proposal. The CSDE encourages further conversation among stakeholders about leveraging existing work on alternative schools.

**House Bill No. 6978, An Act Requiring The Commissioner Of Education To Develop And Submit A Comprehensive State-Wide Interdistrict Magnet School Plan** would sanction development of a blueprint for magnet school planning into the future, something the CSDE is already working towards.

With their theme-based curricula in support of individualized learning, magnets have proven to be extremely popular public school choice models. Questions of school costs, equitable funding structures, and escalating transportation costs are just some of the areas of concern moving forward. The CSDE would welcome these conversations about how best to plan statewide for the future of magnet schools.

**Senate Bill No. 1059, An Act Concerning High School Graduation Requirements** would extend, by one year (and thus affect students scheduled to graduate from high school in 2021 instead of 2020), the implementation of new high school graduation requirements. The proposal would allow additional time for the CSDE to develop approaches to support districts with these substantive changes, as districts and other stakeholders continue to raise concerns about staffing and scheduling implications. Furthermore, given Connecticut Core Standards rollout, and existing mastery based- and experiential learning initiatives, the proposal offers a reasonable approach.

Other points to consider within this proposal are opportunities to earn high school credits outside the traditional classroom. Such revisions have generally been conceived, rightly, at the local level through boards of education. It should be noted that in many communities, acquiring credits through institutes of higher education is already possible, as is credit for recognized community service. CSDE would welcome continued conversation on how the Department may support these existing initiatives.

**Senate Bill No. 1060, An Act Concerning The Use Of Restraint And Seclusion In Schools** is an area of continued focus for CSDE's Bureau of Special Education. It is important to note that seclusion, per state and federal law, may only be used as part of a student's approved Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and that restraints can only be used in an emergency situation. The CSDE supports the goal to prevent against inappropriate use and reduce the prevalence of restraint and seclusion. While well-intentioned, we believe that portions of the proposal require further study, such as imposing time limits on the length of an emergency restraint as opposed to limiting it by the time it takes for the emergency to pass. Furthermore, the bill, as written, restricts a planning and placement team's ability to consider seclusion as a behavior intervention under certain criteria and based on a functional behavior assessment. Through the planning and placement team process, parents and school professionals might determine that seclusion would be an appropriate behavior intervention for certain students that have not had success with alternative interventions. The Department welcomes continued discussion regarding this important subject to ensure that the final proposal accomplishes the intended result.