



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



**Connecticut General Assembly  
Education Committee  
Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell  
February 24, 2016**

Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle and members of the Education Committee, I am Dianna Wentzell, Commissioner of the Department of Education, and I am pleased to have an opportunity to testify before you today regarding a series of important education-related proposals.

**Raised Bill 175, An Act Concerning Recommendations Of the Department of Education.**

This bill incorporates the Department's 2016 legislative priorities and I would like to thank the Committee for raising it.

**Sections 1 and 2** of the bill create the Connecticut State Seal of Biliteracy. This initiative is something the Department is particularly excited about. Our proposal mirrors laws that have recently passed in several states and would allow a Superintendent to place a seal of biliteracy on the diploma or transcript of a student who has demonstrated a high level of proficiency in both English and another language. Its purpose is to recognize students who have realized the great achievement of being bilingual and provide employers and colleges with another means of easily identifying them. As a technical matter, this draft of the bill does not indicate that students will need to be proficient in both English and another language, it says "one or more foreign languages". That clarification should be made.

**Sections 3 and 4** propose fixes to the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) legislation that was passed last session. The Department was unable to implement one provision of the bill that required the calculation of the top 10 percent of districts, using the District Performance Index, to be exempt from having to comply with the MBR. There is not just one performance index for a school or district, there are difference index scores for English Language Arts, math and science. As an alternative, we propose using the newly created Accountability Index, which will produce a single score that takes into consideration not only performance, but also graduation rates, chronic absenteeism and college and career readiness metrics. This will produce a more holistic measure of district performance than mastery test data alone, and will allow the Department to calculate a top 10 percent that is comprised of truly high performing districts.

**Section 5** of the bill makes changes to legislation from last session regarding reciprocity for out of state teachers. In an effort to make it less burdensome for high caliber teachers from other states to enter Connecticut, we are proposing three changes to current law. First, this allows the Department to enter into recognition agreements directly with states or territories, such as Puerto Rico, that are not participating in the inter-state reciprocity agreement. This proposal also addresses a limitation the Department believes was inadvertently included in Public Act 15-108 that restricts the entry of individuals from other states who did not seek certification or work under a certificate in the other state, but otherwise meet all of the criteria. This would allow such individuals to be eligible to seek

certification here. Lastly, this proposal allows the Department to issue an appropriate level of certificate to individuals looking to transfer certifications from another state. Under the bill that was passed last session the Department will no longer be able to take into consideration the number of years of successful service an individual may have in another state to issue a higher certificate than an initial certificate—which may discourage talented teachers from relocating to Connecticut. This proposal would allow us to continue our current practice of awarding provisional certificates to individuals who have successfully served for 30 months or more in the past 10 years.

**Section 6** makes two changes to the bilingual certification legislation passed last session. First, it reinstates the requirement for bilingual educators to demonstrate oral proficiency in English if it is not their native language. Because bilingual certification authorizes educators to teach academic content in two languages, we believe not requiring them to demonstrate oral proficiency in English was an oversight. The second part of this proposal puts back into statute a provision that was inadvertently eliminated last session allowing elementary bilingual education teachers to be certified to serve students in grades K-8.

**Section 7** limits the carry-forward of Alliance District funds to 3 percent of the amount received in the prior fiscal year and requires districts to expend them in accordance with their approved Alliance District plan. In the first year of the grant, most districts did not receive funds until the second half of the year. To spend a full year's grant in less than half a year would have been challenging so they were permitted to carry forward balances into the next year. This has since created a habit for some districts, which we are seeking to correct. By capping the carry forward amount, we can help districts align their spending more closely to their school improvement strategies, thereby having more of an impact on student learning for the current academic year.

**Section 8** pertains to the Parent University Pilot Program. The proposal seeks to strike the word "pilot" from the statute as this program has been in existence since 2012 and is no longer in the pilot stage. Existing statute also limits the number of Parent University grants that the Department can award. The Department would like to have the flexibility - - when funding is available in the future - - to extend the program to additional districts beyond Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven and New Britain.

**Section 9** pertains to capital funds for magnet schools used for incubation space for Sheff start-ups. These funds are used to fit out temporary space for classrooms. Currently, if the statutorily required 10 year provision is not met, the state can claim up to 10 percent per year in bond funding. Because the Department could not build spaces quickly enough, the Capitol Region Education Council needed to find a town to host a school and then go through all local planning and zoning procedures, which was often a 6-7 year process. The swing spaces were typically reused for the remainder of the 10 years, but now that magnet schools are no longer opening, we are reaching a point where there will not be any new students to go into the spaces. Without this correction, the Sheff partners would be subject to repayment of the funds intended as grants-in-aid, to ready space quickly to accommodate Hartford and suburban students in accordance with the assorted Sheff remedies.

**Sections 10 and 11** accomplish three goals in relation to our Priority School District Grants. Portions of the grants were not extended in statute beyond FY 2015, so the Department is not able to pay the grants. This proposal would 1) extend the timeline to pay the grants, 2) allow the districts to carry-forward unexpended funds until next year, because they will not receive the money until May and 3) fix a numerical error with the grant to Norwalk.

**Section 12** allows for payment of the Supplemental Magnet Transportation Grant to the Capitol Region Education Council to cover the additional costs of transporting students in the Hartford area in support of the Sheff initiative. The current Sheff reimbursement rate for magnet transportation is two thousand dollars per pupil, when in reality, the cost is between four and five thousand dollars per pupil. Pursuant to the stipulated agreement requiring the Department to have a regional transportation system, we contract with CREC to act as administrator for the system. In the current agreement, the Department must seek legislation in order to pay CREC the difference. Without this correction, CREC will experience a significant transportation deficit.

**Section 13** fixes a timing problem with the effective date of the estimated student enrollment data for paying the first half of the magnet operating grant to Goodwin College. As currently written, the data and the first payment are both due on September 1<sup>st</sup>, however, the payment is supposed to be based on the data. This proposal moves the data reporting requirement to August for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2017 and each fiscal year thereafter, so the Department can use it to make the payments by the September 1<sup>st</sup> deadline.

#### **Raised Bill 174, An Act Establishing A Task Force To Study Professional Development And In-Service Training Requirements For Educators.**

The Department is supportive of this proposal and believes that the work of this Task Force would complement the recent work of the Department regarding professional learning standards. Connecticut has implemented multiple transformative initiatives in recent history. We believe that it is a commonsense next step to review and analyze existing requirements for alignment, relevance, and impact on educators' professional development needs in this new educational landscape. Furthermore, in this new economic reality, it's especially critical that districts ensure that finite resources such as time and funding are spent as efficiently and effectively as possible and the work of this Task Force has the potential to assist in this endeavor.

#### **Raised Bill 5304, An Act Concerning Authorization Of State Grant Commitments for School Building Projects.**

The Department is supportive of the construction projects being put forward in this legislation and has consulted with the Department of Administrative Services on the magnet school projects, which require SDE approved operations plans before moving forward.

#### **Raised Bill 5305, An Act Concerning Paraprofessional Training.**

The Department would like to raise two concerns with this proposal. First, in this new and challenging economic reality, we are concerned with any proposed legislation that would result in

additional unfunded mandates for districts. We are also concerned with the language in lines 10-14 of the proposal, which requires the training of a paraprofessional hired or reassigned after the start of the school year, before the paraprofessional is allowed to start their new assignment. We feel this may result in a delay in the implementation of a student's IEP if the paraprofessional cannot be trained by the district in a timely manner.

### **Raised Bill 5307, An Act Prohibiting The Unreasonable Delay of Enrolling A Child In Kindergarten**

The Department has several concerns with this proposal as written, two of which I would like to highlight for you now. We believe the conditions being proposed in this bill under which a child can be kept out of school until age seven - - 1) either a physician certifies that the child should not attend school until age seven, or 2) the child has been identified as having a developmental delay - - are both illegal for a school to consider to delay entry into public education under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, the Rehabilitation Act Section 504 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Furthermore, the current statute's intent (CGS 10-184) is to address "The Duties of Parents to Enroll their Child in a Public Education" but Raised Bill 5307 uses language about enrolling in Kindergarten, which is misleading and may cause confusion. It could be interpreted as a "delayed entry to Kindergarten" or "preschool retention" (i.e. "redshirting") instead of the intent of the statute which is to ensure that parents enroll their child in a public school education or its equivalent when a child reaches a certain age. The word Kindergarten would be eliminated and replaced with "public school enrollment".

### **Raised Bill 5308, An Act Concerning A General Education Multitiered System Of Instruction And Supports.**

The Department is in strong favor of this proposal. We stand ready to revise our 2008 framework for Response To Intervention and will act as a resource to districts as they implement Scientific Research-Based Intervention (SRBI) programs at their schools. The Department has long felt that the benefits of SRBI come from its emphasis on uniting scientific research-based practices with systems approaches to education. Scientific evidence is substantial for areas central to children's school success and well-being, such as reading, language development, some areas of mathematics and social-emotional learning. We also feel this bill complements and helps to support the efforts being undertaken as a part of Governor Malloy's Second Chance Society Initiatives, with interventions that will assist in identifying potential learning and behavioral challenges at an early age and offering multitiered levels of support and intervention.