



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly  
Judiciary Committee  
Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell  
March 23, 2016

Good morning Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, Senator Kissel, Representative Rebimbas and members of the Judiciary 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 **Raised Bill 5642, An Act Concerning The Recommendations Of The Juvenile Justice Policy Oversight Committee.**

The Department is proud to serve as a member of the JJPOC, and applauds their efforts to close the school to prison pipeline, reduce recidivism, keep kids in our classrooms and make sure everyone has equal access to educational opportunities. These initiatives are vital to the success and sustainability of our urban centers, and will have a direct impact on the lives of countless young people in our state. The work of the JJPOC, the work that is done here on the Judiciary Committee and the work Governor Malloy is doing through his Second Chance Society initiatives will - quite literally - change lives, and will provide students with opportunities and options that are not currently available to them. The Department is extremely supportive of these efforts and will continue to do our part to ensure that every student in the State of Connecticut graduates high school ready to succeed in college, careers and civic life.

There are several sections of this bill which have a direct impact on the Department of Education. While we are supportive of the concepts, there are concerns with some of the language as drafted, so we appreciate this opportunity to provide feedback.

**Section 10** removes truancy from the definition of what constitutes a "family with service needs". We are supportive of that change.

**Sections 11 and 12** pertain to the creation of truancy intervention models in school districts with disproportionately high rates of truancy. Under the proposed bill, these truancy intervention models are required to be approved by the State Board of Education. We are supportive of this measure and believe it could be of great benefit to students if it is implemented well. The Department is concerned, however, about the proposed timeline, which requires the State Board of Education to evaluate the models and publish a list of approved models no later than January 1, 2017. This process makes sense but additional time will be needed. We would also like to note that we would not be able to carry out the requirement to assist and oversee the process in each district without an additional full time employee.

**Section 14** requires the Department to develop and implement a plan for school-based diversion initiatives, which is work currently being undertaken by the agency through Governor Malloy's Second Chance Society. We fully support this effort and welcome additional time to implement it. We would suggest changing the language in line 432 to read "...shall develop a methodology for assessing the effectiveness of the initiatives... and shall report on such effectiveness".

**Section 15** requires the Department to report to the JJPOC on the implementation of district attendance review teams, which is data we do not currently collect. We would need to develop a mechanism for this collection, which would result in a cost of approximately \$25,000 to the Department to evaluate the implementation. This section also requires the Department to report on the progress of the Prevention and Intervention Plan, which is currently drafted and will be finalized in the coming months.

**Section 16** makes several changes to our expulsion statute, some of which, while well intentioned, would create significant burdens on local districts and the agency. The Department is currently in the process of thoroughly analyzing expulsion issues and statewide student discipline and chronic absenteeism data in an effort to develop comprehensive legislative proposals for the long session next year. It was our intention to have discussions with all of the relevant stakeholders during the interim with the goal of passing legislation that will be effective in reducing the length of expulsions, decreasing the number of expulsions, ensuring there are adequate supports in place for expelled students and providing tools to help them reenter the school environment when their expulsions are complete. The Department does support the spirit of certain portions of this section. For example, the Department supports section 16(e), which would require alternative education opportunities for students who have been expelled for certain potentially criminal conduct, an entitlement that is currently not provided for in state law. We also agree with the ideas that any student facing expulsion should be represented by an attorney or properly trained advocate and that any student returning to school from a diversionary program or juvenile detention center should have appropriate educational and emotional supports, but, to accomplish these goals, significant fiscal and capacity issues will need to be worked out. We have other concerns as well and would welcome an opportunity to have an ongoing discussion regarding this section of the bill with the goal of producing a revised version that the Department would be able to support.

**Section 17** requires the Department to develop and implement entrance requirements for the referral of students involved in the juvenile justice system to alternative education opportunities. This is similar to work the Department is already doing under 10-74k with alternative education guidelines. We believe it could be incorporated into that work and be carried out under the FTE needed to comply with sections 11 & 12. For clarity we would suggest making the following language change starting at the beginning of line 700 "...appropriate opportunities for receiving alternative education as defined by section 10-74j...".

**Section 18** requires the Department to develop a remediation plan to address districts with higher than average out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates, racial disparities or numbers of students involved in the juvenile justice system. The Department is very supportive of this measure, but believes it will require additional staff to implement.

**Section 22** places many new requirements on the Department, several of which should be the responsibility of the Court Support Services Division with support from the Department of Education. There are also very significant fiscal concerns with this section. We would welcome an opportunity to have continued discussions regarding where some of this work is most appropriately placed and the burdens certain provisions will place on the agency.

**Section 24** requires the Department, in collaboration with DCF and the Judicial Department, to address educational deficiencies found in children in the juvenile justice system and create an assessment tool to measure the education performances of children who transition from the juvenile justice system. The Department is supportive of this work.

The Department feels that the requirements outlined in **Section 26** are unnecessary. The Preschool through 20 and Workforce Information Network (P20WIN) is already in existence and links the three agencies listed in the bill, therefore no new data gathering is required. The Department also already has data relative to high school graduation and dropout rates. We recommend this section be stricken.

The Department also feels that the requirements outlined in **Section 27** are unnecessary and that the language is unclear. The Department is already sharing education records securely with DCF for children under their care in any public school district in the state, which began in 2012. The Department will soon be sharing education records with CSSD if they are able to procure parent/guardian consent. MOUs are already in place, the data sharing mechanism has been established and test data have already been transmitted. This system should be fully operational by June. As such, we also recommend that this section be stricken.

The Department would like to reiterate our strong support for the efforts of the JJPOC. Understanding that this is a work in progress, we look forward to continuing to collaborate on this bill as the session progresses.