



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT *STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION*



## Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell March 6, 2017

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 7205, An Act Concerning Early Literacy**

We support this proposal which would codify in statute work that is largely already being done by the Department in the area of early literacy. Having said that, we have partnered with outside stakeholders in the field as well as vendors to support these early literacy initiatives, which could be compromised if funding is cut for projects such as READ-Conn or CK3LI. We would also caution that the professional development modules required for Tier one universal supports will necessitate additional funds to implement.

### **Raised Bill 950, An Act Concerning The Streamlining Of The Hiring Process For Manufacturing Teachers In The Technical High School System**

We fully support this proposal and would be happy to create a guidance document to clearly outline the statutory and regulatory requirements for individuals interested in working in the Connecticut Technical High School System.

### **Raised Bill 7206, An Act Concerning Charter Management Organizations**

In 2015, the General Assembly passed significant new laws for Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). These include robust protections for ensuring charter school independence from CMOs, a new requirement for State Board of Education approval of CMO-Charter school relationships, a mandate that all CMOs must be non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations, and strong transparency requirements. These laws are in their infancy and it would be premature to make some of the principal changes outlined in this bill. Several such changes would dramatically alter the status of CMOs beyond the existing strong requirements. Also, passage of these provisions could have the effect of causing CMOs that are conducting their work lawfully and bringing real value to children and families of Connecticut, to decide to stop doing work in our state, thus risking closure of the schools they are serving.

### **Governor's Bill 786, An Act Concerning Education Mandate Relief Transparency And Regional Incentives**

The Governor's proposal is focused on providing districts with flexibility, streamlining services, easing unfunded mandates, and starting discussions that will promote more regional cooperation. It also brings the state's three incorporated or endowed academies in line with respect to school accountability, which we fully support. Currently the endowed academies send bills to the districts

they serve with no oversight, this proposal would give those districts a voice on the school governing boards and allow for public hearings pertaining to their budgets. Furthermore, sections (c), (d) and (e) of Section 12 parallel the recently passed charter school accountability statutes, and will bring the endowed academies into alignment with the transparency, budget and reporting requirements of other multi-town districts, ultimately helping to better serve the students who attend them.

### **Raised Bill 7207, An Act Making Revisions To The Student Data Privacy Act Of 2016**

We fully support the deferment of the effective date to July 1, 2018 to allow for a more thoughtful implementation of the required provisions of the 2016 law. This will greatly ease the burden currently being felt by districts.

### **Raised Bill 951, An Act Concerning The Testing Of Public School Water Supplies**

The Department is opposed to this proposal for several reasons. This should not be a local and regional board of education function. Drinking water is regulated by the Department of Public Health (DPH) in accordance with the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. DPH currently has direct responsibility for monitoring the approximately 170 schools in the state whose water source is their own domestic well. The remainder of schools operate under their municipal water supply system and the municipality is required to conduct periodic sampling of the water quality. Furthermore, allowing districts to request reimbursement from the Department for the costs of these tests, is not feasible in the current budget climate.

### **Raised Bill 7201, An Act Applying The Sheff Definition Of Reduced-Isolation Setting To All Interdistrict Magnet Schools In The State**

The Department agrees with the goals of this bill in theory, but does not agree with the language as it stands. We support unifying the desegregation standard for the state in accordance with the Sheff standard, but do not support linking it to the 2013 stipulation, an order which will expire in June. Negotiations are still pending at this time, so it does not make sense to propose conforming to the Sheff stipulation which may change in the coming months. We are also opposed to requiring schools established prior to 2005 to conform to this standard when they are currently only subject to the residency standard. It will take a substantial amount of time for those schools to attain a racial compliance standard. Having said that, we are aligned with the goals of this legislation and are happy to collaborate with you to develop workable language.

### **Raised Bill 953, An Act Implementing The Recommendations Of The Task Force On Professional Development And In-Service Training Requirements For Educators**

The Department participated in the work of this task force and supports its recommendations to streamline and modify the professional development requirements for PK-12 teachers across the state. Currently there are 106 hours (or 13 days) of required professional development for teachers outlined in statute, which conflicts significantly with the 18 hours required by C.G.S. 10-148a(a). As stated in the task force report, over the past ten years, there has been a significant increase in statutorily mandated trainings for public school educators, which is causing a loss of critical instructional time with students. Meeting these mandates is also untenable for school districts in the face of significant cuts to fiscal and personnel resources.

### **Raised Bill 7204, An Act Concerning The Electronic Transfer Of Student Records**

While we support the principle of what this legislation is trying to accomplish, the Department is very concerned that, as written, it would result in districts emailing confidential students records, which is not an appropriate method of transmission. By the start of the next school year the Department will have a secure-EdSight completed, which will allow districts to login and view all student level data housed at the Department. We would suggest waiting until that time to determine if EdSight achieves the goals of this proposal.

### **Raised Bill 7202, An Act Concerning The Status Of Aviation Maintenance Programs And Licensed Practical Nurse Programs Offered At Technical High Schools**

The Department fully supports this proposal. We are working on language changes that we believe may more closely meet the federal legal standard for Pell-awarding programs and will provide you with them as soon as they are completed.

### **Raised Bill 954, An Act Concerning The Development Of A Plan For Universal Preschool**

The Department is strongly in favor of the ultimate goal of this proposal and believes that it would be a great benefit to the children of our state to offer universal preschool. However, this will be a significant cost for many districts who currently cannot afford to offer universal kindergarten without using Alliance District or federal funding. We believe the timeline is ambitious, but we are willing to work on a plan and make recommendations for a more achievable goal.

### **Raised Bill 7200, An Act Implementing The Recommendations Of The Task Force On Life-Threatening Food Allergies In Schools**

While the Department recognizes the seriousness of certain food allergies and the importance of keeping our children safe when they are at school and on the bus, we cannot support this proposal. First and foremost, this would have a very adverse effect on the Culinary Program at the technical high schools. Culinary Arts is a trade that has accreditations through the American Culinary Federation and our current curriculum meets the requirements to allow students to graduate with a stackable credential as Junior Certified Culinarians (CJC). By altering the curriculum to meet the requirements of this proposals, CTHSS would jeopardize the accreditation as well as a student's ability to obtain the CJC certification. We would request the removal of that language. Having said that, we are happy to work with the Department of Public Health to update the Department guidelines for the management of students with life-threatening food allergies and make those guidelines available to districts. However, we would request that the due date for districts to implement a plan be changed to August 15, 2018 to allow time to complete the revision of the guidelines, get stakeholder feedback and provide those guidelines to the districts, so they can incorporate them into their plans. We also believe that the new requirements for bus drivers will result in an added unfunded mandate to the districts.

### **Raised Bill 7203, An Act Concerning A Review Of The Impact Of The Racial Imbalance Law on School Districts**

While we agree that this study is a very well-intentioned, it would take a considerable amount of time and resources for the Department to complete, which we are not in a position to undertake at this time without significant additional resources.

**Raised Bill 955, An Act Concerning State Assistance To Certain Underperforming School Districts**

The Department is in favor of this proposal but requests that the evaluations we are required to perform are conducted at the district level, as we do not have the capacity to manage this at a school level.