



STATE OF CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell March 8, 2018

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 this opportunity to testify before you today regarding a series of important education-related proposals.

Raised Bill 364, An Act Concerning Special Education Funding

The Department is unable to support this proposal. The current funding for this account is at four and one-half times and still not adequate to support the costs associated with our highest need students. Reducing the threshold to two times will redistribute funding away from districts that are educating our highest need special education students. The costs for serving many of these students can easily exceed \$200,000 per year. Forecasting for these special education costs can be especially challenging due to the movement of students in and out of districts. The very point of this grant is to provide relief to districts when this occurs, therefore the Department would urge you not to support this proposal.

Raised Bill 5334, An Act Concerning Notification By Contractors To Boards Of Education Regarding Incidents Of Arrest Of Employees

This proposal requires a contractor who provides services to school districts to notify the district if it learns of any arrest of an employee who has direct contact with students. The Department believes this is too broad and would ask the Committee to narrow the scope, as there are many criminal charges that do not relate to child safety or well-being. Also, any action taken based only on an arrest rather than the outcome of any criminal proceedings, raises fairness issues and potential legal problems. In many cases the employer needs to wait until the police have completed their investigation. In addition, it may be useful to note that the policy of the State in its employer capacity is generally not to permit action to be taken based on an arrest which is not followed by a conviction (see General Statutes Sec 46a-80(e), which prohibits records of arrest not followed by conviction to be used by the State or any of its agencies in connection with an application for employment or a permit, license, certificate, or registration). The Department would be very happy to work with the Committee on the language of this bill to bring it to a place that we could fully support.

Raised Bill 359, An Act Prohibiting The Disaggregation Of Student Data By Ethnic Subgroups In The Public School Information System

The purpose of disaggregating data by demographic sub group analysis (ex: gender, race, ethnicity, family income, special education or English Learner status) is to ensure educational equity for all students. In CT we disaggregate data only by the federally required demographic groups. If we do not disaggregate and publish our data in manner to allow this analysis we would be obscuring achievement gaps in schools and districts and would put millions of dollars of federal funds at risk. Current data

collection addresses these federally required categories in compliance with United States Education Department requirements. Connecticut does not collect information regarding national origin for immigrant students, but we do collect information relating to whether a student is an immigrant. This is for federal grant purposes. Some states are discussing further disaggregation within racial, ethnic, and linguistic populations to identify if there are groups of students who need additional support. We are not considering this level of disaggregation at this time.

Raised Bill 5335, An Act Concerning The Alignment Of The Coordinated State-Wide Reading Plan With The State's Two-Generational Initiative

We are supportive of this proposal but would caution that the work in this area will suffer and we will not be able to carry out this new coordination with the two-generational initiative without appropriate funding. The CK3LI line item has already been reduced and adding additional components would make this project untenable. Having said that, we believe that including parents in the work of CK3LI could create vital opportunities to accelerate the Department's parent engagement efforts and subsequently expand the reading plan work to equip families with the knowledge and skills needed to increase their children's reading abilities.

Raised Bill 362, An Act Concerning Remedial Instruction In Reading

Similar to the last proposal, the Department fully supports the goal of this legislation, but will not be able to carry out the charge without appropriate funding. We currently have one Reading Director and one K-12 English Language Arts consultant within our Academic Office. The provision of a needs assessment for each school and school district in the state, analysis of those needs and the provision of technical assistance to each is profoundly beyond the capacity of the Department.

Raised Bill 5336, An Act Concerning The Funding Of The State Education Resource Center

The language within this proposal makes the State Education Resource Center (SERC) a separately budgeted state agency. We are unsure whether that was the intent, or whether it was to provide SERC a line item within the Department's budget. Making SERC a separately budgeted agency does not have an impact on the Department and we would welcome the appropriation of sufficient funds to support the work of the organization. We fully support the outstanding work performed by the State Education Resource Center, but with the current appropriation from the Legislature, we are no longer in a financial position, to provide SERC with the significant levels of funding that we have historically. If the Legislature can appropriate the funds to support their work, we would fully support this proposal.

Raised Bill 363, An Act Concerning Immunization Records, The Definition Of Chronic Absenteeism And The Requirements For Policies And Procedures Concerning Truants

The Department cannot support this proposal which requires the State Board of Education to define "immunization records absence" for the purpose of excluding such absences from the calculation of a school district's chronic absenteeism rate. Regardless of the reason, students who are not in school are losing critical instructional and learning time and students who do not have immunization records miss out on the beginning of the school year which is critical to position them for successful learning. By identifying those students who have attendance challenges early in the school year, and are at risk of being chronically absent, schools can work to ensure children receive immunizations. Removing "immunizations records absences" from districts' required absence reporting, sends a disturbing

message that masking the data is more important than encouraging a system of intervention that supports students attendance. Additionally, this change conflicts with federal regulations for reporting. This legislative proposal also removes the requirement that a meeting be held with a parent/guardian of a student who is truant in favor of "contacting" the parent/guardian. A "contact" or notification, which may occur via phone message, e-mail, text, or US mail, may not reach the intended recipients and is not an effective vehicle for resolving the serious issue of truancy. Central to improving attendance in school is the establishment of meaningful relationships between adults and students, and schools and parents/guardians. A simple contact would not enable the opportunity to problem-solve and develop solutions in the way a face-to-face meeting would. Inviting and requiring parents/guardians to attend a meeting at school sends a clear message as to the seriousness of truancy.

Raised Bill 5342, An Act Establishing A Task Force To Study Best Practices Regarding Social-Emotional Learning

The Department is supportive of the intent of this proposal and is committed to Social-Emotional Learning and efforts to support the emotional intelligence of teachers, students and leaders. The State Board of Education recently approved a Position Statement on Social, Emotional and Intellectual Habits for all Students K-3. The Board's position statement complements an accompanying guidance document (Components of Social, Emotional and Intellectual Habits: Kindergarten through Grade 3) which represents the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that form an essential blueprint for college and career readiness, and supporting academic success and social-emotional development. If this proposal moves forward we would like to work with the Committee to amend the scope of the work, add other key state agency and community partners to the task force who are already engaged in these efforts and extend the deadline for reporting, as January 1, 2019 is not feasible for the work necessary to develop a robust and actionable report.

Raised Bill 361, An Act Concerning Interdistrict Cooperation And The Reporting Requirements Of Cooperative Arrangements

We support the new language in section 1 of this proposal, but cannot support subsection (e) of section 3. This language would allow LEAs participating in cooperative arrangements to report expenditures at the aggregate level when reporting to the Department. This will make it challenging to determine if these arrangements actually create savings and is in direct violation of ESSA which requires school level expenditures broken out by source of revenue. If this language is removed the Department would be fully supportive of the proposal.

Raised Bill 5341, An Act Providing Immunity From Liability For School Bus Drivers Who May Administer Medication To A Student

This proposal raises many questions and concerns for the Department and we would like to work with you on amending the language. For example, school bus drivers are not always employees of the school district, yet this legislation has them functioning for the purposes of medication administration "under the general supervision of the school nurse." It is unclear what that actually means. Additionally, there is no specificity around the type of medication, which creates concerns (emergency v. non-emergency, EpiPen injectors for emergency food allergy anaphylaxis, anti-epileptic emergency medication that needs to be administered rectally, etc...). Line 68 - refers to students "with a medically diagnosed allergic condition" and it is unclear if the information as to which students are in this category is actually known to the bus driver, leading to additional questions. Would the bus have

to carry EpiPens? Could they administer to kids suffering anaphylaxis for the first time (i.e. in undiagnosed cases)? We appreciate you taking these concerns into consideration and would appreciate an opportunity to work with the Committee on this language moving forward.

Raised Bill 360, An Act Establishing A Task Force To Study Best Practices Regarding Response To Intervention

The Department believes that it would be beneficial to review/update best practices, strategies and structures for Scientifically Research Based Interventions (SRBI) across the state. Universal Screenings, Tiered Interventions, and Data Driven Decision Making are necessary components for early intervention for all students both academically and behaviorally. Additionally, this process would provide a structure to assist with the much needed update to the 2008 CT Framework for SRBI document. The Department would be happy to serve on this taskforce, but caution that the January 1, 2019 reporting date is very ambitious and may be too aggressive.

The last four bills on your agenda **Raised Bill 5340, Raised Bill 5337, Raised Bill 358 and Raised Bill 5339**, while we understand that these are all placeholders for what will be more detailed proposals, in their current form they require the Department to conduct studies on various education issues. Regrettably, we are not in a position to take on this type of additional work without additional resources. We are struggling to meet our current statutory requirements with a rapidly diminishing workforce and budget. There is no capacity to take on these kinds of efforts.