



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee
Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell
March 13, 2019

Good morning Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee. I am Dianna Wentzell, Commissioner of the Department of Education. I apologize for being unable to testify before you today. Please accept this detailed written testimony in my place. I would be happy to meet with any members, should you have questions.

S.B. 1017, An Act Concerning The Open Choice Program

The Department is unable to support this proposal due to fiscal concerns. The proposed changes require any regional education service center (RESC) that manages the Open Choice program to provide districts that accept over 40 students with an educational advocate. The duties of the advocate are defined as aiding with the transition of new students, acting as a liaison to parents in a new school district, and providing academic and social supports. Although the duties proposed for the advocates are valuable, the cost associated with the proposal make it impractical unless funding is provided.

There are 23 districts that enroll over 40 students through the Open Choice program. A few districts have staff dedicated to the Open Choice program but their salaries and duties vary widely from a low of \$30,000 to over \$70,000. If we average the annual salaries at \$50,000 (without including benefits), the cost of 30 advocates would be approximately \$1,500,000 and benefits would likely take the figure over \$2,000,000.

In the Hartford region, Open Choice districts currently receive funds (\$2.4M) through the Academic and Social Support grant. Most districts have used the funds to provide tutors and provide social/emotional supports; only a few have chosen to use funds to provide advocates or liaisons, which are already allowable expenses under the current grant. The Department supports districts' targeted use of these funds based on their individual needs and student populations.

S.B. 1018, An Act Concerning The Opportunity Gap

The Department is generally supportive of this proposal with a few suggested changes. Regarding the Priority School District grant language in lines 51-115, the recommended intervention is an Intensive Reading Program in all years, with 50% of the grant funds being focused on chronically absent children in year 1. The Department would recommend using the Performance Index for English Language Arts instead of using the Accountability Index (AI). The AI is a compilation of all 12 indicators and could go up or down based on other measures unrelated to reading. Moreover, the process outlined in the proposal requires year-over-year evaluation of increase/decrease in the measure. For that purpose, the Performance Index would be much more of an apples-to-apples comparison for as long as the state evaluation remains the same.

Unlike with the Priority School Districts the language for Alliance Districts in lines 212-220 does not include a graduated reduction in funds. The intent seems to be focused on ensuring that funds are used for evidence-based strategies. If that is the case, we would recommend using language that is compatible with the Department's alignment with the Every Student Succeeds Act's (ESSA) approach for assisting Alliance Districts who are not meeting their target AI scores. That language requires Alliance Districts not meeting their targets to spend the vast majority of their funds on evidence based strategies that are included but not limited to those outlined in the Department's evidence-based guides. If the focus turns to evidence-based guidelines, it makes the use of the Accountability Index more appropriate because it provides for a broader perspective, including but not limited to ELA, Math, Science, attendance, and college/career readiness.

As for the Commissioner's Network language, the Department would like to request a change from "shall" to "may" in line 336. The current framework that we use to make determinations uses not only the AI score, but also takes into consideration progress in talent, academics, climate and culture, and operations. That rubric, as well as onsite evidence, plays a large role in our current decision making. We could not support making a change to using the AI scores alone.

Lastly, the Department has some concerns with the data collection language due in large part to our staffing and resource levels. The immense amount of work involved with collecting data for every subgroup on every measure at the school level, then disaggregating the data and creating a report is not something we could accomplish within available appropriations.

S.B. 1019, An Act Concerning School Literacy

The Department is very supportive of the legislature's continued and intensified focus on early childhood literacy. There is nothing more important than delivering on the most basic right that every child has to learn how to read on time. Having said that, we do have fiscal concerns with this proposal, and while we are generally supportive of the work, funds cannot be diverted from the Department to carry it out. We are happy to continue having discussions regarding the funding portion of this proposal as the session progresses.

S.B. 1020, An Act Concerning School Equity

The Department is supportive of including culturally responsive pedagogy and practice in the preservice training, professional development and in-service training provided to teachers. The State Board of Education approved standards for teacher professional development in May of 2015. The first standard pertains to cultural competence.

S.B. 1021, An Act Establishing A Comprehensive Community Schools Pilot Program

The Department has serious fiscal and capacity concerns with regard to this proposal. Establishing and administering this pilot program, along with performing the additional evaluation and reporting requirements, will be a monumental undertaking for the Department. We currently have successful school and district improvement programs and this would likely divert a considerable amount of staff time from those programs. We are also concerned that there is no identified funding source for the grant itself.

S.B. 1022, An Act Concerning Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention

The Department is very supportive of the many efforts that have been made in recent years to streamline the certification process and to recruit and retain minority teachers in our state. We continue to look forward to working with you in this area. Having said that, despite our many legislative and departmental efforts over the last three years, we still have yet to achieve 200 new minority educators each year, so the goal of 250 in section 1, may be unachievable.

Additionally, we have two technical suggestions related to the wording of the bill. In line 124, we request that the word “teacher” be replaced with the word “educator”. Educator is a more broad and inclusive term and would capture other certified support specialists who may not be classroom teachers. Lastly, we would suggest broadening the language in section 5. We are concerned that the requirement of receiving the grant during an undergraduate program may eliminate candidates who did not pursue education at the undergraduate level but are interested in obtaining certification as graduate students. We can expand the pool of recipients if we include undergraduate or graduate (e.g. Master’s in Education) or a candidate at any Alternative Route to Certification program, not just the program administered by the Office of Higher Education.

S.B. 1023, An Act Concerning The Provision Of Alternative Educational Opportunities For Expelled Students By Boards of Education

The Department cannot support this proposal for a variety of reasons. The list of characteristics outlined in lines 8-10 of alternative educational opportunities for students who have been expelled specifically omits the characteristic of “*providing a full-time, comprehensive experience, where the learning is comparable to what a student would experience in a regular school environment*” as is required in the State Board-approved *Standards for Educational Opportunities for Students Who Have Been Expelled*. This omission eliminates the assurance that students who have been expelled will have access to high quality programming based on a uniform set of standards.

In lines 8-9, the second characteristic proposes the use of “a curriculum aligned with guidelines approved by the State Board of Education.” This language is unspecific regarding the guidelines. The curriculum should be based on the Connecticut Core Standards, the curricular framework used throughout the State. The *Standards for Educational Opportunities for Students Who Have Been Expelled* requires “a curriculum aligned to the Connecticut Core Standards.”

We also cannot support the requirement for all districts to submit policies to the department annually. This is an additional burden to the districts as well as the Department. To make the collection meaningful in any way, review and feedback would be necessary from the Department and we do not currently have the capacity to provide that type of review.

Language in lines 47-48 eliminates the State Board-adopted Standards as the foundation of the alternative educational opportunities provided to students who have been expelled. Rather, it would make each district’s local policy the basis of such alternative educational opportunities. This will result in inconsistencies in the quality of programming for expelled students from district to district. The expulsion of students from their school may be an indication that the students have

intense educational needs. While students who are expelled do not have rights that exceed those of their peers in the traditional school setting, they may require more intensive supports to ensure their success and equitable access to a high-quality education. Therefore, we recommend that the legislation maintains the *Standards for Educational Opportunities for Students Who Have Been Expelled* as the statewide basis for all alternative educational experiences for students who have been expelled. These standards were vetted through a committee of statewide stakeholders, and approved by the State Board of Education. They are further supported by the Department's Best Practice Guidelines for Program Implementation that are based on national best practices. Maintaining these Standards as the basis for alternative programs for students who have been expelled assures a high quality educational experience that will position the students for success.

H.B. 7149, An Act Bolstering Minority Teacher Recruitment

We are very pleased to support the Governor's proposal pertaining to minority teacher recruitment. The Department has done an incredible amount of work over the last several years and we look forward to making additional progress while we continue to move the dial in this important area. The Governor's proposal directs the Department to enter into reciprocity agreements with Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, New York and New Jersey. We are very supportive of this directive and believe this will go a long way in the recruitment of teachers from our surrounding states. Additionally, the Governor's proposal authorizes certified teachers who graduated from an Educational Reform district, or a historically black college or university, or a Hispanic-serving institution, to apply for mortgage assistance through the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority. Lastly, the Governor's proposal makes several changes to the certification and recertification statutes to increase parity between in-state and out-of-state applicants.

H.B. 7311, An Act Concerning The Creation Of A Community-Based Transition School Pilot Program

Unfortunately, the Department does not have the fiscal or staffing capacity to take on this pilot program at this time. The language as currently drafted is very vague and raises several important questions. How will a "community-based education transition school" be defined? What ages would be served by this program? How will the pilot grant be funded? It is important to note, that dollars received through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, cannot be used for students who have either graduated or aged out. The evaluation and reporting requirements are also not responsibilities we can undertake within available appropriations and current staffing levels.

H.B. 7312, An Act Establishing A Task Force To Study Issues Relating To Parental Involvement With Students

The task force along with the work outlined in the proposed bill are duplicative of work already occurring at the Department. The Department values families as essential partners in student success and we recognize the need for authentic opportunities for meaningful parent engagement. Building capacity for families and school staff to partner effectively in support of student success through effective relationships is specifically outlined in the State Board of Education's Five-year Comprehensive Plan. To implement the plan, the Commissioner of Education launched the Commissioner's Roundtable on Family and Community Engagement in Education, which was created with the goal of building the capacity of educators, parents and community members to prepare

students for success in college and career. The Roundtable has been meeting quarterly since its inception in 2016. Through the Roundtable's efforts, the Department recently published *Connecticut's Definition and Framework for Family Engagement*, titled: *Full, Equal and Equitable Partnerships with Families*. This publication provides a roadmap to the development of a robust culture of partnership between families and professionals, not only in education but in all human service programs. Membership in the Roundtable includes most organizations listed in the proposed task force, as well as a broad list of stakeholders and organizations including parent organizations, school staff, child advocacy and child development agencies, higher education and students. The Roundtable is uniquely positioned to address the issues identified in the proposed language and can provide a report to the legislature as outlined in the bill if the report can be due in October 2020.

H.B. 7313, An Act Concerning Homeless Students' Access To Education

The majority of the changes proposed in this bill would codify existing federal law under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which we fully support. Under this proposal, responsibility to determine the burden of proof shifts from the student to the local education agency as "the party claiming ineligibility" for school enrollment due to non-residency. That is not part of the federal statute. We are hopeful that this shift does not result in unintended consequences for families experiencing homelessness with districts pursuing "evidence" in an effort to tip the burden of proof balance (e.g., homeless families unfairly targeted for "surveillance" or other forms of investigation). Under current law, as is the case with all students/families, it is the student/family experiencing homelessness who validate their status of homelessness. The Department would like to flag that as a potential concern.

I look forward to continued discussions and collaboration on these bills as the session progresses. Please reach out to me, or my Chief of Staff and Legislative Liaison, Laura Stefon, if you have any questions about this testimony.