



Senate Bill 874
An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut

Testimony of Commissioner Josh Geballe

Education Committee
March 1, 2019

The Department of Administrative Services ("DAS") thanks the committee for the opportunity for comment in support of Governor Lamont's proposed **Senate Bill 874, "An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut."**

DAS looks forward to participating in the proposed Commission on Shared School Services and working with towns, schools and other Commission members to identify opportunities to create efficiencies and improve students' learning experiences.

In particular, DAS believes that technology can be a valuable tool in this process. The Commission for Educational Technology ("CET") within DAS has launched successful initiatives and programs to support its charge of developing, overseeing, and directing the attainment of state-wide technology goals, including "connecting all institutions of higher education, libraries, public elementary and secondary schools, regional educational service centers and other parties through a state-wide, high-speed, flexible network that [allows] for video, voice and data transmission." (C.G.S. § 4d-80(c)(A)). The Connecticut Education Network (CEN) provides Internet and educational technology resources to every public school district, every public library, and every non-profit college or university in the State. CEN is both an exemplar of the benefits of shared services and a valuable tool that can be leveraged to create additional synergies.

DAS also supports Governor Lamont's proposed reforms to the school construction grants program, set forth in sections 21 through 26 of the bill.

Section 21.

Section 21 includes a housekeeping statutory change, in keeping with current statutes, that it is the Commissioner of Administrative Services who approves the school construction Priority List.

More importantly, section 21 proposes three additional requirements for School Construction Grant Applications.

The first change is part of the Governor's initiative toward additional collaboration by school districts. The provision would require that school districts demonstrate proactive efforts they have made to collaborate with neighboring school districts. It is not a good use of taxpayer money to build or expand school facilities without consideration being given to the facility needs and capacity of neighboring school districts. Investing in new or expanded school facilities in one school district, when excess capacity exists in a nearby district, is not good planning. We cannot afford this inefficiency in how our state has historically done things, either at the local or state level.

The second new application requirement codifies something that DAS and the School Building Projects Advisory Council have already put into effect. Specifically, there is a new space standards calculator that breaks down the space needs in a school building project, based on the academic program, enrollment and other design considerations. The legislature has charged the Department and Council with carrying out a continuing process of improvements to the School Construction Grant program, and we will continue to offer statutory changes to codify what we would recommend are good practices.

The third of the new grant application requirements also concerns work underway at DAS. Effective planning in the allocation of School Construction Grant dollars is, by far, best accomplished when it is done with full cognizance of the condition and needs of school facilities. This information is needed about individual school buildings, and it is needed as part of metrics useful for statewide facility priorities.

The legislature wisely repurposed the statute that provided for what was the ED050 survey and tasked DAS with developing a process for much more in-depth evaluation of school facilities, their condition and how well they provide for the education program in each school district in Connecticut. DAS is contracting with a company already widely used by school districts in school facility management to carry out the new, enhanced evaluation and data survey. The desire is to make this much more than a survey every five years. Rather, the goal is that the data be continuously updated.

We anticipate that this system will allow school districts to more effectively plan their own needs, based on objective statewide benchmarks for maintenance, renovation and capacity. In turn, that same data will provide DAS, the Governor and the legislature with a transparent and complete view of what school construction work is needed in the state, again, against fair and comprehensive benchmarks.

This data will also advance another policy objective that is important – facility maintenance. It is important for the state to be aware of how well districts take care of the facilities that they have, facilities in which the state has often invested a considerable amount of money. Taxpayers, statewide, should not be on the hook for school

construction work that is needed because of poor maintenance. Preventive maintenance is often among the first things cut when budgets are tight, which has been the case for many years, but it can also significantly add to long-term costs. It is not unfair for state policy-makers to expect that local officials take care of the taxpayers' investment.

This third change to School Construction Grant application would require that school districts state, as a central component of their application for state funds, what the new state survey and data shows about their facilities and facility needs.

Section 22.

Section 22 is a simple but common sense change in state law. It would require that at least one person on each local or regional school building committee have construction industry experience. It is quite possible that many towns and regional districts comply with this provision already. The provision is intentionally flexible, to allow each town or regional district to decide for themselves who is qualified to meet this requirement. This is a best practice worth codifying for applicability throughout the state; every school building committee have a least one person in the room who can speak, from personal experience, about the real-life dynamics inherent in having been on a construction project, in some capacity.

Section 23.

Section 23 would change two things, for school construction project applications submitted to DAS on or after July 1, 2019.

First, it would remove the provision that added a three-year look-back into the school construction reimbursement percentage calculations. This change created confusion about the manner by which the reimbursement percentages should be calculated and necessitated a degree of interpretation in actually performing the calculations. DAS suggests that it is unwise to retain this in statute going forward. The proposal before you builds on the calculation basis that was in place previously.

More importantly, section 23 would reduce the amount of the reimbursement percentages by decreasing the level of lowest percentages. The rate for new construction would be from 5% to 70%, and the rate for code improvements, roofs, renovation and approved new construction would be 10% to 80%.

In addition, there would be a change in the way that new construction is approved for the higher rate. The current statute requires that the higher rate only apply when new construction can be shown to be less expensive than renovation. The new provision would allow the Commissioner of Administrative Services more flexibility in determining the appropriateness of the new construction project. This is particularly

important as we ask districts to think regionally and work together, so that collaboration may bring cost and other benefits that could make new, joint school construction projects more desirable than renovation of existing schools. Each case will have to be judged on its merits, and those merits will, in turn, be objectively evaluated using the new tools discussed above. There is a bonus of 25% reimbursement for new or expanded cooperative or regional school districts, rather than the existing 10%.

Section 24.

Section 24 would decrease the maximum reimbursement for an incorporated or endowed high school or academy from 85% to 60%.

Section 25.

Section 25 would provide that, if any Regional Educational Service Center (RESC) school building ceases to be used as a school facility, which it would revert to the ownership of the state. As you know, there is great concern at this time about the ability of a RESC to operate independent of the kind of local and state accountability that applies in the case of other types of school districts. It is possible that this flexibility could allow for a RESC to venture into business that is outside of the purposes for which school construction grants are provided by the state, so this provisions assures that RESC schools built with state funds remain as schools for the long term.

Section 26.

Section 26 is designed to address the treatment of diversity schools under the School Construction Grant program. The proposal offers a common-sense, logical and fair approach for these projects. Under this proposal, a district would be incentivized for undertaking a diversity school with a bonus of ten percentage points on their normal school construction reimbursement percentage. This approach would allow any school district undertaking a diversity school to receive a benefit, while, at the same time, its rate of reimbursement would still be tied to the need basis under the School Construction Grant program.

DAS believes that SB 874 sets forth a thoughtful and reasonable approach to ensuring that Connecticut's students receive the high quality education they deserve and urges its passage.