



STATE OF CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell March 1, 2019

Good morning Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee. My name is Dianna Wentzell, and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Education. I appreciate being given the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Governor Lamont's proposed 2020-2021 biennial budget, as it pertains to the Department.

I would like to start by saying how thankful I am to Governor Lamont for maintaining the state's commitment to education, and to the Legislature for continuing to make education a priority. We live in fiscally challenging times and the decisions that you will have to make over the next four months will not be easy. I am committed to working with you and with Governor Lamont throughout the budgetary process on behalf of the Department.

Nine days ago in his budget address, the Governor said that education is the opportunity engine for all of our young people, and I could not agree with him more. Education is the great equalizer. There is likely nothing more crucial to setting a child up for success than that child's education. For these reasons, it is important that we remain child-centered when engaging in discussions that pertain to education, because our adult decisions directly impact the lives of our children.

Keeping that in mind, we are very supportive of the Governor's Commission on Shared School Services, which is set forth in Senate Bill 874, *An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut*, before you today. We are no longer living in a time where it is practical, or feasible, for the state to have over 200 independently operated school districts. This is our reality, and it is the education of our children that is at stake. Already some of our smaller school districts are unable to offer a full complement of educational programming. To be very clear, we are not in favor of forced regionalization as proposed in other bills you will hear today. Instead, the Governor's bill uses an incentive approach to encourage shared services. The conversation about new ways of collaborating must happen in earnest and we are happy to have a seat at the table.

We are also grateful to Governor Lamont for increasing funding for the Education Cost Sharing Grant, as well as the Alliance District grant. This continued investment in the Alliance Districts reaffirms our commitment to revitalizing high-need districts, which impact approximately 225,000 of our 540,000 students, at more than 400 schools in 33 districts across our state. The Governor's proposed budget also maintains funding for the Commissioner's Network schools, which represent a pledge between local stakeholders and the Department to dramatically improve student achievement in up to 25 schools.

We understand the ongoing need for shared sacrifice during these difficult times and we stand ready to do our part, while continuing to implement policies that work toward closing the achievement gaps, elevating learning, and acting in the best interests of the children of the State of Connecticut. Having said that, I would caution, that if further reductions are proposed by the General Assembly that go beyond the Governor's recommendations, we will need to reevaluate the programs we currently offer to determine if any will have to be suspended for us to maintain our core mission to the children of our state and to carry out our daily charges.

The Governor's budget proposal is step one in a very long process. As we move forward, the Department is prepared to work with the legislature to provide whatever guidance or information you will need to make informed decisions to ensure equity and excellence in education for all students. Again, I appreciate being given the opportunity to testify before you today, I look forward to working with you and the Governor this session and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.