



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee
Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell
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Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty 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 number of important education-related proposals on your agenda.

S.B. 1068 An Act Concerning The Minimum Budget Requirement

The Department is not opposed to this proposal but would ask that the language be amended to reflect a two-year look-back period for reductions in student enrollment, as opposed to a five-year look-back. Currently we calculate the resident student deduction after districts have already passed their budgets. The timing means they cannot take the savings or they must estimate what it will be when calculating their budget. The language as written would create a substantial amount of work for the Department by requiring us to modify the minimum budget requirement data collection to track new information for a five-year period before we can perform the calculation. We believe a two-year look back would serve to solve the current timing issue and allow districts to take advantage of the resident student deduction savings in the following year.

S.B. 1069 An Act Concerning Various Revisions And Additions To The Education Statutes

The Department is generally supportive of this proposal. We believe certain sections pertaining to background checks are necessary in order for our statutes to be compliant with the federal rules regarding the disclosure of fingerprint records. Much of that language was developed through the work of a taskforce that the Department participated in prior to the start of session. The final section of this proposal adds "sexual harassment and assault, adolescent relationship abuse and intimate partner violence, and human trafficking, including commercial sexual exploitation" to the programs of instruction that must be offered in public schools. We believe these topics are of importance but would like to note that districts will need guidance and support in order to offer this instruction in a developmentally appropriate way, using culturally responsive methods. The Department does not currently have a health education consultant who would be able to assist in that work.

H.B. 7350 An Act Concerning Regional Cooperation And The Sharing Of Services Among Regional Educational Service Centers And Member Boards Of Education

As stated in previous testimony on this general topic, we believe that 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. Therefore, we would be in support of any proposal that requires a study of shared services. We do not currently have a full time employee who could perform the work outlined in this proposal, so the Department would require additional resources if this were to move forward.

H.B. 7351 An Act Concerning Graduation Data For The Technical Education And Career System

The Technical Education and Career System is in possession of the graduation rate and programs of study data that this proposal seeks and could modify its annual report to include it.

H.B. 7352 An Act Concerning Minor Revisions And Additions To The Education Statutes

The Department cannot support section 3 of this proposal, which would negatively impact the ability of Priority School Districts to recruit educators. We also cannot support the removal of edTPA as the pre-performance assessment in section 4. edTPA is a performance-based, subject-specific assessment and support system that is used nationally in more than 30 states by educator preparation providers to emphasize, support, and measure the skills and knowledge that teacher candidates need from day one in their classrooms. edTPA training and assessments align with the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching and the CT Core Standards and was adopted in Connecticut through a broad based stakeholder process that reached consensus on principals to transform teacher preparation. In 2017, the General Assembly passed legislation that requires the Department to report annually on the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs and removing edTPA would be in direct conflict with the intent of that legislation. These assessment should also not be developed individually across all educator preparation programs as is suggested in section 5. There absolutely must be a set of uniform, professional standards across the state. We are generally supportive of the rest of the bill, however we do have fiscal concerns with administering the pilot program outlined in section 8 and would definitely be unable to develop, implement and sustain a program beyond a pilot.

H.B. 7353 An Act Concerning Various Revisions To Special Education

The Department has many concerns with this proposal and would welcome an opportunity to speak with the proponents of the various sections mentioned below in an effort to work on language that might be more amenable to the Department.

We are unable to support the change outlined in section 3. This is a planning and placement team (PPT) decision and would cause undue hardship on districts, as many self-contained programs are often housed in only one school in the district. This language would also override the authority of the PPT and potentially negate due process procedures.

We believe that the interpretation and implementation of 10-76q has been problematic in the past, but we strongly believe removing this language will be equally problematic without an in-depth analysis as to the benefit of this change and without the Connecticut Technical Education and Career System (CTECS) being given the resources and infrastructure to support its removal. The Department undertook a significant review of the admissions policy for CTECS last year and made many recommendations for improvements which are currently being implemented. We would ask that no change be made until that implementation is complete.

Section 5 could be problematic from a teacher evaluation and professional conduct perspective. We would want it to be very clear that teachers could still be evaluated based on professional conduct

during PPT meetings. Furthermore, no recommendations regarding special education services should be made outside of a PPT meeting, so we would ask for that language to be struck in line 128.

The Department has some concerns with the scope of the data project outlined in section 10, but believes it could deliver the information successfully on a more limited set of students. Not all students who have hearing or visual impairment qualify for special education under the Individuals With Disabilities Act. The Department only knows about those students who have visual and hearing impairments if they have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). If the intent is to track and gather data on non-IEP students, that would create a tremendous amount of work that we could not undertake without additional resources. If this is limited to students with an IEP, who have a primary disability of deaf/blindness, hearing impairment, or visual impairment and are taking state assessments, it would be more likely that we could create the requested report.

H.B. 7356 An Act Concerning School Security

We believe with the addition of child care centers and preschools to the entities eligible to receive school security infrastructure grants, it may be appropriate to add the Office of Early Childhood to the grant review committee. We would also suggest pushing back the reporting requirement date for the school security officer taskforce outlined in section 2. Given the importance of the tasks being contemplated in the proposal, the timeline seems aggressive.

H.B. 7357 An Act Concerning A Study Of Education Mandate Relief

We are generally very supporting of mandate relief for our local and regional boards of education, however we are not in a position to take on this type of study without additional resources. We are struggling to meet our existing statutory requirements with a rapidly diminishing workforce and budget, and therefore currently do not have the capacity to take on this work.