Testimony of Dr. Scott V. Nicol, Superintendent

IN SUPPORT OF H.B. NO. 7258
AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A FIRM GRADUATION DATE AND THE DATE FOR THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL SESSIONS

Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee, my name is Dr. Scott V. Nicol, Superintendent for the Ellington Public Schools and a proud former Executive Director for the Hartford Public Schools and I am here today, on behalf of the Ellington Board of Education (EBOE) and as a member of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), to speak in support of H.B. NO. 7258 AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A FIRM GRADUATION DATE AND THE DATE FOR THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL SESSIONS.

As the Education Committee is well aware, this is a legislative session with many complex, expensive and controversial legislative proposals. This bill does not fall into that category. This is common sense legislation that 1) will not require any state funding; 2) will benefit urban, suburban and rural communities; and 3) will provide mandate relief.

Specifically, I am here to address and provide my full support for the removal of current language from Section 10-16l of the general statutes.

3 Notwithstanding any provision of the general statutes, [to the contrary,] a local or regional board of education may establish for any school year a firm graduation date for students in grade twelve [which is no earlier than the one hundred eighty-fifth day noted in the school calendar originally adopted by the board for that school year, except that a board on or after April first in any school year may establish such a firm graduation date] for that school year which at the time of such establishment provides for at least one hundred eighty days of school.

Each and every school year graduation dates are set by local Boards of Education. This is typically followed by parent volunteers organizing “safe graduation parties” that occur the evening of the graduation ceremony to ensure safety. Families make plans to attend months in
advance. Graduating seniors make plans for summer internships, freshman college orientations and/or to enter the workforce or military.

Yet, every school year, inclement weather occurs (snow in particular), canceling school and resulting in an unnecessary logistical nightmare amongst hundreds of high schools across the state. This can result in the following:

- Students miss the graduation ceremony to attend their freshman college orientation.
- Students entering the military have a separate graduation ceremony from their peers.
- Students delay their summer internships or work opportunities, in some cases by a couple of weeks.
- Parent volunteers are unable to secure the same “safe graduation” venue often resulting in the event occurring a day or two after the graduation ceremony and at times resulting in the loss of monetary deposits.
- School districts with large and/or multiple high schools that hold graduation at an outside venue may have to change to another location and often result in the loss of monetary deposits.
- Family members change plans (flight itineraries, work schedules, etc.)

Current state statute that attempts to address this dilemma is unnecessarily complicated and ineffective.

This legislation is not to diminish the importance of the 180 day rule or the value of extended school year state and local school district initiatives. Local Boards of Education will still be required to adopt school year calendars that require 180 days of school for students in grades kindergarten through eleven.

Currently, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts allows for the early release of high school seniors in which seniors regularly graduate prior to attending 180 school days. Per the late Massachusetts’ Commissioner of Education Dr. Mitchell Chester, February 2011, (603 CMR 27.05),

“The earliest permissible release day for seniors is twelve school days prior to the regularly scheduled closing date of the school, which means that high schools operating on a 180 day year for students may release the seniors as early as the 168th day of school.”

This concept has strong support from families, students, Boards of Education, parent volunteers, teachers, superintendents, CAPSS and many state legislators. I respectfully recommend that H.B. NO. 7258 make it out of the Education Committee so that a vote may be taken by the legislators.