

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

CHAIRPERSON: Representative Edwin
Vargas

SENATORS: Duff, Looney, Fasano,
Formica, Hartley, Kushner,
Moore

REPRESENTATIVES: Phipps, Perillo, Davis,
D'Agostino, DiMassa,
Godfrey, Yaccarino,

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Will everyone please take their
seats? We're calling the public hearing of the
Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee to
order. But before we begin, I'd like the clerk to
read the safety instructions. Madame Clerk.

CLERK: Please make -- in the interest of safety I
would ask you to note the location of and access to
the exits in this hearing room. The two doors
through which you entered the room are the emergency
exits and are marked with exit signs.

In the event of an emergency, please walk quickly to
the nearest exit. After exiting the room, go to you
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follow the exit signs to one of the other exits.
Please quickly exit the building and follow any
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and do not return unless you are advised that it's
safe to do so.

In the event of a lockdown, please remain in the
hearing room, stay away from the exit doors and seek
concealment behind desks and chairs until an all
clear announcement has been heard.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Madame Clerk. My name is Representative Edwin Vargas and I'm the chair, the House Chair of the Executive Nominations Committee and next to me is Representative Phipps who is the vice chair.

As you'll notice, we have more members of the Committee but they all service on numerous committees so they'll probably be coming in and out during the hearings. But don't worry about it, we keep our votes open on all nominees until 4 p.m. so everyone gets a chance to cast their vote. So you will be seeing people coming in and out most likely.

We also have -- the way this Committee operates, we interview our nominees. The people have been designated by positions either by the Executive Branch of government or by the Legislative Branch for government.

We interview them, whatever members happen to be here can ask questions of the nominees. We usually allow them to given introductory -- an introduction of themselves for the first few minutes so we can get idea, a little bit of an idea of their backgrounds.

Then after we ask the questions, we -- when once we finish with the interviews of the nominees, we allow members of the public that would like to either support or oppose a nominee to come forward and testify. We also accept written testimony into the record.

The -- then following this public hearing, we have -- we call to order a regular business meeting on which we act on the -- and the nominees. Then we

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

keep the votes open until 4 for members of the committee who couldn't make it for the vote.

Without further ado and in respect of everybody's time, I'd like to get started. The first nominee before us is Miguel A. Cardona of Meriden who has been appointed by Governor Ned Lamont to be Commissioner of Education.

Mr. Cardona, will you please rise? And before you're seated, this is the hot chair right here in front of me, but before you sit down, could you please raise your right hand? Do you promise to tell us the truth and nothing but the truth?

Please be seated and congratulations on your appointment as Commissioner of Education. And at this point, as customary, you have the floor, you can press the button and make sure your mic is on.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): You have the floor to make your introductory remarks.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you. Good morning, Representative Vargas and Representative Phipps. First I'd like to thank Governor Lamont for nominating me for this position and the State Board of Education for recommending my nomination to the governor.

I'm Miguel Cardona, Sr. and I'm humbled and honored to sit here in front of you seeking confirmation as Commissioner of Education for the State of Connecticut.

I was born and raised in Meriden and I'm a product of the public schools and a graduate of our state

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

technical high schools. I hold five degrees or certificates from Connecticut universities and I'm a true product of the system I hope to lead.

I have taught fourth grade, led as a school principal for 10 years and was selected as Connecticut's National Distinguished Principal in 2012. That distinction afforded me the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C. to represent this great state.

I have served as an evaluation specialist and assistant superintendent and an adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut.

During my time as principal, student growth soared and a tremendous sense of community was established within the school. As assistant superintendent, I focused on school improvement, district systems and stake holder engagement. Similarly, student outcomes increased while I served as an assistant superintendent.

In 2011, I was asked by legislative leaders to serve as a member of the Connecticut Legislative Achievement Gap Task Force. I was then asked to serve as co-chair of the task force along with Senators Toni Harp and later Andrea Stillman.

It was at that time that I finished my doctorate which culminated in a study on the need for political will to address achievement disparities. The work of the Achievement Gap Task Force produced a report which to this day contains some of the most bold and progressive recommendations for improving education and addressing opportunity and outcome gaps by race and zip code.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

In 2015, I continued this work by chairing the English Learners subgroup of the task force and with the support of the legislature, was able to make adjustments to bilingual education law.

In 2017, I co-chaired an early childhood leaders collaborative where we focused on bridging the gap that previously existed between the Office of Early Childhood and the State Department of Education. I'm proud to say that one of my final meetings there, the invited guest was then Senator Beth Bye. I'm fortunate to call her my colleague as she now leads OEC.

For the last four years I have served as an adjunct professor at UConn in their Principal Preparation Program. There, I supported student's growth while providing input on how the Principal Preparation Program could evolve to prepare students for addressing challenging issues of equity in our schools today.

I was sworn in on August 7 as Commissioner Designate and since that time I have visited roughly 40 schools and districts from Groton to Enfield, from Hartford to Darien. I have spoken to hundreds of students and teachers and dozens of administrators and superintendents. I have been listening to the needs of our shared constituents.

Their messages are coming out loud and clear. We need to address inequities in education and we need better pathways to success for the 530,000 students in Connecticut.

I am prepared, motivated, and passionate about delivering positive outcomes for them and for you. In these past six months as Commissioner, changes

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

have been made within the agency to better reflect the needs of our state.

In a plan that provided a net savings for the agency, I appointed a Deputy Commissioner for Academics and Innovation to address achievement, Mr. Desi Nesmith. And Deputy Commissioner for Educational Wellness and Supports, Ms. Charlene Russel Tucker.

The SEL development of our students is just as important as their academic growth and it must be addressed head on by the agency. We are up for this task.

I have also created the position of Director of Innovation and Partnership within the agency filled by Mr. Chris Soto whose job it will be to foster workforce partnership and preparedness while engaging with districts to promote inter district efficiencies and collaboration in order to provide students with additional opportunities.

We will create better college and career pathways for students while guarding against tracking students as adolescents.

We are finalizing the hire of an equity and language position which will support and monitor bilingual education and English learner services throughout our state, while working with districts in efforts to reduce disparities in student performance.

These are just some of the changes that have occurred since August 7. I'm really proud of the team I have here behind me and confident that they'll help us lead our students to unprecedented heights in Connecticut.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

But there is another group of people that I want to acknowledge, as they prepared me today -- they have prepared me today for more than any degree I have earned or experience I have had. They serve as my motivation.

I'm joined by my beautiful wife Marissa and my children Miguel Jr. and Celine right behind me. Both are public school students in the city I'm fortunate to call home in Meriden.

My journey as a goofy, little Puerto Rican kid born in Yerlakers (phonetic) housing complex in Meriden to serving as the role of Commissioner of Education was easy compared to the sacrifices made by my parents who are also here, Hector and Sara Cardona.

My parents along with my grandparents Avellino and Maria Cardona, Hama Munoz and Martin Rosa (phonetic) paved the way by giving up their dreams and opportunities for higher education so that their kids and grandkids can dream.

It was important to me that I said their names out loud and that you heard their names. I'm here because they were my best teachers.

My parents raised three kids to serve their community. My sister is a social worker and my brother Hector who is here also is a detective sergeant and I'm an educator. I'm glad my parents and kids are here to witness this hearing today.

The passion I have for public education stems from my belief that it is the best lever for economic success and prosperity in Connecticut. And the belief that public education is still the great equalizer. It was for me.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

In humble appreciation to those that are here to support me including Representative Abercrombie and Senator Daugherty Abrams, including colleagues from the State Department of Education, the leadership team is seated here behind me, the State Board of Education member Aaron Bennom is here and supported from other agencies I thank you for the opportunity to be here in front of you today and I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you very much. We have been joined by state Representative Godfrey and I just want to say that, you know, you have an extensive background and extensive experience. We are very, at least I'm very happy to see you serve at this position.

As you probably know, I'm a lifelong educator myself, 35 years in Hartford Public Schools and now retired. My wife too, Sylvia Vargas, is also 35 years in the Hartford Public Schools so we committed to the public school system.

We lived in the city we taught in, the city of Hartford. We still live there, own a house there, our kids went through the Hartford Public School system and we know the challenges ahead and we know that we need strong leadership.

I also whenever there is an appointee to the State Board of Education whether it's to the board or an administrative position, I always like to state my position on the fact that I think we have to slow down on the charter school movement.

My experience was and I was a strong early supporter of the charter schools. I had a -- as a matter for fact, the first charter school in the city of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

Hartford I signed for it as a partner so that we could experiment.

I believed that, you know, motivated teachers wanted to try different model, should be given the freedom to try that as an urban experiment and that hopefully we would learn things that we could apply to our local neighborhood schools. So I supported it.

Unfortunately, as time progressed, it started becoming an independent system that in many ways looks down on the public schools and I think it's lost its original mission and it's proliferated at the expense of the public schools.

So a few years back, I did put a motion to try to have a moratorium on the construction of new charter schools. Although that didn't pass, the fiscal reality of the state of Connecticut has slowed down that movement anyway.

So I'm just encouraging because part of the problem the way I see it is many of our agencies, state agencies are understaffed. And as they become more and more understaffed, people complain more and more and a private option starts looking attractive.

But I think, I sometimes wonder if we are not as public servants, sabotaging ourselves by undercutting our own agencies that later make outside options look better than they really are.

So I think we have to double down on our neighborhood schools and I think we have to make sure that they succeed because frankly they're the ones that accept most of the kids and they're the ones that are open to every kid.

And charter schools although they say that they have a lottery system, the fact of the matter is that I doubt very much it's a blind lottery from the -- either that or poor kids are very unlucky and English limited kids are very unlucky in the lottery.

Kids with special needs seem to be very unlucky in these lotteries so I question just how blind these lotteries are.

The -- from my point of view I would encourage you as Commissioner of Education to do any -- everything you can to make sure that the neighborhood public schools succeed because that's where our kids really are at. They're at the public schools. Many of them don't have the advantage of these charter schools.

I know that lately I go around the charter schools it seems like the kids there are the kids of lawyers, doctors, professionals, middle class, upper middle class parents. To the type of kids that are college bound and would succeed at any, in any environment. And the ones that seem to be trapped in underfunded neighborhood schools are the kids that don't have those kinds of advantages. So anyway, I'd like your thoughts on that.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you. Thank you for sharing your thoughts. As a product of a public schools and send my children to public schools I value the importance of public education. I value our core commitment to making sure all schools are schools where we want to send our own kids. And that's my focus.

Charter schools provide choice for parents that are seeking choice so I think it's a viable option but

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

to your point about making sure that our public schools are places where we want to send our kids, that's going to be the core work that not only myself but the people behind me in the agency that I represent will have while I'm commissioner.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And I'd just like to add that, you know, we talk about resources. I had the opportunity to visit a few years ago New York Public Schools and the school system was very proud, you know, of their model school which is Aviation High School. So I, in the borough of Queens, New York.

So I had the opportunity to go there. They gave me a tour and I saw the hangars, I saw the jet planes, the jet engines, it was very, very beautiful school. I saw the kids engaged, working on the jet engines. I saw engineers mentoring the kids. It was really a wonderful experience.

But the principal of the school kept insisting that he received the exact same funding as any neighborhood public school. So after the tour, we had a question and answer period and I had an opportunity to ask the principal some questions.

And I forget what the per capita per student was at the time, but the Chancellor of Education was getting a, I think somewhere around \$12 or \$14,000 somewhere in that range per student per school and that was the school budget for the neighborhood public schools.

And I asked the principal, I said where did these jet engines come from? And he said well they were donated by Boeing; they were donated by Pratt & Whitney in Connecticut. They were -- and I said and these engineers that are mentoring the kids, where

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

do they come from? Well, the corporations give them time from their jobs to come and help mentor our kids.

And I said well, you know, it's not really true that you're operating on the same \$12 to \$14,000 range as the neighborhood public school principals operating because if a neighborhood principal had to purchase even one of those jets or one of those jet engines even, it would probably bankrupt their budget for the year. They wouldn't be able to turn on the lights in the school.

And I'm sure that if you had to hire those engineers as being people that are hired rather than being people, you know, as consultants, paid consultants rather than as volunteers from the company, paid for an underwritten by these companies who allow them time off their jobs to come here, that that would also be a huge expense that would not be covered by a local principals budget.

So when we look at some of these schools that have all this kind of corporate backing and support it's not really a fair comparison. Because like I said, you know, just -- I can't think of any principal who could afford to construct a few hangars and buy a few jets and a few jet engines and hire as consultants a bunch of aeronautic engineers.

So anyway, that's just food for thought at this point. You know, I'll ask my vice chair if he'd like to -- all right. Representative Godfrey, you have the floor.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Commissioner, welcome.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

MR. CARDONA: Thank you. Good morning.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): Just for full disclosure, not only did I meet with the Commissioner about a week or so ago to talk about his nomination, but he was kind enough to visit Danbury a couple weeks ago, come to Danbury High School which is the largest high school in the state of Connecticut.

And we got to talk about a lot of local issues that I'm going to bore most of my colleagues with probably, but unlike most school districts, Danbury is severely overcrowded.

And to the surprise there are 305 more kids than anticipated last September, last August when the school year opened and we are struggling to deal with that.

There is simply more -- there literally weren't enough desks for the kids in the high school and the overcrowding extends down to the middle schools and to the elementary schools.

And so we did talk about that and the Commissioner was very kind to both visit, realize, see in and see the particular problems that we were having and committed the State Department of Education to helping us out and deal with this.

And there are others school districts who are dealing with overcrowding issues. I know Norwalk's facing the same thing, Bethel. So it's not just, it's not a big city thing.

And a lot of the so called surprise was attributed to immigration into the city. Come to find out thought, at that visit, the immigration wasn't coming from Latin America, it was coming from West

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

Chester County, New York because believe it or not, taxes are lower in Connecticut than they are in West Chester County.

And so people were, families were moving into town, especially into Danbury because our education system is better than what they were receiving in West Chester.

It changed my outlook to discover that and wonder what other kinds of data and demographics will be available. So I'm looking into that and the Department has been over helpful in doing that.

So we are experiencing the two Connecticut problem and I know you are too. We have suburban schools, and this is a suburban state in a time when people want to live in cities, we only have suburbs. We don't have big cities.

The urban schools are struggling with retaining faculty, with sufficient resources, physical, with funding, while rich suburban towns and I know a lot of them in western Connecticut, Danbury is surrounded by them, are doing well.

Now we have got a really good faculty in Danbury. Graduates of Danbury High School go to Ivy League schools. They go to the MIT's and they've got real career opportunities ahead of them including a community college and a state university in Danbury. You don't have to leave home to get a good education in western Connecticut.

But, we still have problems with ELL. We still have problems with kids that are coming in with little or no -- little background in actually going to school wherever they came from.

And sadly, sometimes up here in the suburban legislature, that gets overlooked. So I'm certainly interested in knowing -- I know you're aware of the issue but perhaps you can share with us your approaches to dealing with it.

MR. CARDONA: Sure, thank you. The issues of supporting English learners is an important one for the state of Connecticut to grapple in the next three to four years.

That's the largest growing subgroup of students that has historically underperformed. And one thing the agency is going to do is make sure that we're supporting districts in their efforts to develop capacity to meet the needs of English learners but also providing a proportionate amount of accountability to make sure that the students are growing at the right levels.

All teachers are English learner teachers. So the scope of influence that we are going to have is based on how well we promote practices that teach all teachers how to best support English learners and that means that we partner with universities to make sure that the teacher prep programs are exposing preservice teachers to good pedagogy.

We're finalizing a position hire in the next I'd like to say the next month with a candidate that has extensive experience in this. And that person is going to work as a partner with districts that are trying to develop systems of building capacity. Very important issue.

The overcrowding that I experienced when I went to Danbury and what a, worth repeating, the high school you would never know there are 3200 students moving

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

around in that high school when I visited. It was such a well-run school with high performing students and the student tours were great.

However, as we support Danbury and towns like Norwalk, we have to be very mindful of the fact that our agency does have a role in trying to create partnerships wherever possible with surrounding communities or look for creative ways to address an issue that Danbury might have while supporting an interest or a need that a surrounding community has.

We have the ability to leverage relationships and leverage partnerships better. I think part of the role of the Office of Strategic Partnerships and the Director of Innovation and Partnerships is to be more proactive on that. So we look forward to supporting Danbury.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): I'm glad to hear about also the cooperation of surrounding towns. Obviously we are not going to go to Bethel, they have an overcrowding problem too. But just last week, Rudy Marconi, the first selectman in Ridgefield said he would be interested in doing some kind of cooperative agreement with Danbury and I hope that the, that your department certainly is part of that.

And just so everybody knows, in my school system in Danbury, it's not just Spanish. I have a very large continental Portuguese population and I have a very large Brazilian Portuguese population and the dialects are different, very different. I find Brazilian a bit more sibilant than continental Portuguese. And they are supportive.

And I have got 63 languages which are the first languages spoken by kids in my high school. A lot

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

of east Asia, as well as obviously we have a large Latinx population. We have still eastern European populations.

So I don't envy you the challenge but I'm really happy to see that every teacher has to be an ELL teacher. Its -- education is the key to success.

And the other thing we spoke about, I just want to reiterate here is that we certainly as policy makers have come to the realization the last few years, our school system shouldn't be designed just to get kids ready for college.

They need to get ready for life. They need to have skill sets that give them solid careers. It may be -- especially in something that -- in a career that can't be moved to another country, that are skills necessary and able to be maintained right here in Connecticut and retain the population of young people. And I, if you could share your views as you did with me with everybody on that topic please, sir.

MR. CARDONA: Sure, thank you for the question. I said earlier our success as a state will be dependent on how we support students that are learning English as a second language but I also believe the degree to which we focus on making sure our pre K-12 system evolves to meet the needs of what Connecticut's economy is saying we need will determine how successful we are.

College and career pathways need to be revisited and I think we need to redefine what we think that means.

You know, Representative Vargas mentioned earlier he visited a school in New York that received a jet engine from a Connecticut manufacturer. And I'm thinking, while I understood his point, why isn't it a school in Connecticut that's getting that engine so our learners could get those skills and then be employed in the workforce.

I think another -- so it's really important that our high schools are preparing our learners for good career options and good college options earlier so dual enrollment needs to be more prevalent so especially first generation students have exposure to college earlier.

But with regards to the career pathways, we need to be much more clear that our pathways are giving students opportunities for success when they graduate high school and they could choose to go directly to the middle class.

But we also have to communicate in the same breath that it doesn't mean that you're not able to go to college. So if you choose to go into advance manufacturing for a year or two, then there is a college track that might really look attractive to you, it might be even be paid for by that manufacturer.

So college and career 2.0 is what I call it is really what we need to focus on. We need clear pathways for our high school students and I would go back to middle school.

I know our board recently took up conversation about computer science and how we are exposing students to this. We need to start earlier but we need to be

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

connected to the manufacturers, to the technology industry out there, to the healthcare industry.

We need to be connected better so that our learners are prepared when they leave to take on those jobs and continue their education if they choose.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): I'm very glad to hear that and of course you're also in charge of the vo-tech high school in Danbury, Henry Abbott, which does really, a really good job of staying in touch with local employers.

I have the honor every spring of visiting with the seniors who are about to graduate from the electrical program. And there's jobs waiting for them because there is also an advisory board that the school uses and not just in electric but in a lot of other things.

And you've got to go down and eat there at their café, their culinary school is just great.

Because these graduates are coming out with skills the employers who are older don't have, with knowledge they don't have, with technology information and skills that they don't have.

And they're very eager to hire them. And to see that not only in the vo-tech system, but extended wherever its possible with the public schools, I think you and I agree is a very positive thing we have got to do. Education isn't just theory, its practical skills.

MR. CARDONA: Yes.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): And I'm very happy you're committed to dealing with that.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): Lastly, I need to echo Chairman Vargas's comments on charter schools. I've been the subject in western Connecticut of a very highly paid for group that is trying to do and I get very upset.

Because as you mentioned, they went to the rich part of town and said, you know, we need a school for you guy and then they go to the Hispanic part of town. We need a segregated school and I'm extremely wary of the whole process.

It seems to me to be more than a little dishonest. And seeing the, I think there were three schools closed down or put on probation rather in the New Haven area recently.

MR. CARDONA: There were three schools.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): Two or three. Probably deservedly so and I'm looking at the report cards on the whole institution across the country and it's not good. In fact, think most of them get an F in my opinion.

And watching, you know, Washington push these things is just another annoyance that I have coming out of the federal government.

So and I'm very happy that the governor did not put any increased money for charter schools in his budget. That's something I'm going to fight to maintain as we go through the legislative process. So good luck.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. GODFREY (11TH): You have the fortune or the unfortunate situation where you've been in office for seven months so you've got just enough of a history to be able to kind of take a look at it but I'm very pleased with your progress so far.

And certainly, knowing that people like Representative Abercrombie and the other legislators from Meriden are on your side gives me a very high level of conform. So congratulations --

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): -- and look forward to working with you.

MR. CARDONA: As do I. Thank you very much.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): We have been joined by our Senate Chair, Senator Duff who co-chairs this joint Senate House Committee and also by Representative Yaccarino. Representative Yaccarino.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Cardona, for being here and willing to serve.

A couple questions, your thoughts on Vallejo and their public private partnership and also the pay of the superintendent, much higher than a normal superintendent.

MR. CARDONA: So with regard to the public private partnership with the Connecticut partnership, I -- I'll be -- I'm very pleased that there is an allotment of funds from the private sector aimed at improving outcomes for students.

I think it's a plus for Connecticut that we have outside investors that are saying we want to put our

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

money where our mouth is and we believe that we can do it through public education.

And I'm very -- I'm very I guess feeling confident that the board there has in their mind what the needs of the public schools are because members of their board include public school officials and actually one of the members of the State Board of Education is also the chair of that board. So I look for there to be cohesion on those strategies aimed at improving outcomes for Connecticut kids.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): You know, I think it's a good partnership but how do you feel about if they're FOI-able, you know, transparency like everybody else in the State Board of Education or every other education system --

MR. CARDONA: Right, right.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): -- in our state.

MR. CARDONA: I think -- so what I understand is that any state officials that their FOI -- anyone who has a state position can be FOI'd.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): All right. As far as teachers, like I visit schools all the time in my district and the biggest stumbling block for or barrier for teachers is there is so much testing and there is not enough really just to be a teacher and teach and be creative.

Is there anything that you could see in your future that you could give teachers more leeway to teach and be creative with what, with students? Because that's -- if you must have heard the same thing.

MR. CARDONA: Yes.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): I don't know if you ever -- you have an amazing resume. I don't know if you ever taught though in a classroom K through 12. I see an amazing amount of education but have you taught in a classroom to where you have experience? I have sat in classrooms and it's, I don't know how teachers deal with that. I think it's probably -- I don't, I think it's probably the most important job in our country and too often, not just federal, but state politicians get in their way --

MR. CARDONA: Yeah.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): -- and we create barriers. So I have an issue with that personally.

MR. CARDONA: Sure. Sure. So thank you. Yes, I was a fourth grade teacher.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Okay.

MR. CARDONA: A really proud fourth grade teacher.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): I couldn't find it, I was digging through and --

MR. CARDONA: Sure, sure.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): That's a real big plus as far as I'm concerned.

MR. CARDONA: One of the greatest experiences, you know. So you're absolutely right. I think we have gotten to the point where it's become one assessment after another and they're losing -- it's assessing for the state -- sake of assessing in some places.

And now I'm not going to speak in generalities, it's not like that everywhere. What we are aiming to do in our Office of Academics is really remove any

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

barriers to learning for students which includes an overdependence on assessments that might not even be helpful to the teacher. So --

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Right.

MR. CARDONA: -- the time that teachers have to teach students is critically important. You mentioned my experience. We did some of this work in the district I came from where we looked at the assessments and said which ones are really needed and what can we get rid of and how do our policies at the State Department of Education create a situation where districts feel like they have to do so much more.

We are going to kind of go through an audit of our own needs to provide what we call sensible assessments. Sensible assessments mean making sure that the assessments that are being used provide a service and a benefit to the students so that's something that's high on the agenda for us at the agency.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): I really appreciate that. And I put a bill in I think last four years in a row where the next four -- Commissioner of the Board of Education of the State has to have some sort of classroom experience. I think it's vitally important.

One last question. So I work in Commerce with Senator Hartley. We work, we really try to coordinate jobs between manufacturing and the sciences and I bring up Germany a number of times because Germany, small country, but they, by the time the middle school and I'm glad you mentioned

middle school you really have to start in the middle school.

They're preparing their students between the middle school and by the time they graduate for an associate's degree in either a manufacturing or some sort of science or some -- anything but that is actually practical to go --

MR. CARDONA: Right.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): -- get a job and be prepared. And it doesn't matter your background, and you have to have that practical experience, you have to be ready to work. And we all learn at different levels so I know it's a different country, but it's a small country.

I would hope we work with you and don't get in your way and get in teachers way that we have that coordination that's where kids are prepared with some sort of skill set. We all learn differently. I was probably slower but I always like to read, so to me reading was my therapy.

So just please do your best to work with teachers, the Board of Education. If we get in your way, tell us we are in your way and but at the end of the day, it's the teacher's job but I think arguably is probably the most important job in our country.

MR. CARDONA: And research supports that. They're the most influential factor so we have to support what they're doing.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): So thank you very much.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you. Senator Duff.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you very much and congratulations, sir.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Appreciate your service and being our newest education commissioner. We have had a chance to chat earlier and the fact you've had a few months already experience is a good thing and helps to prepare us and prepare you for this process and moving forward.

Actually, to Representative Yaccarino's point, I think -- I also do believe that teaching is some of the hardest, some of the most hard working professionals that we have in our society.

I used to be a long term substitute teacher when I got out of college in middle school in 7th grade which I think is really hard. (Laughter) And I got into politics because I thought it was easier than what I was doing before. (Laughter)

So I, you owe, any teacher always has my appreciation for the hard work that they do. And I know that you've, you've certainly done a lot in your time and have a great vision for our state and its education.

And pardon me for being a little bit late to the hearing this morning but if you can just talk a little bit about where you see your vision because we spoke a little bit about kind of getting a little bit more into the weeds or down into the agency about how best you can partner with board -- local boards of Ed., not by heavy hand but really in partnership to help them utilize their scarce

resources with the resources of the state to come up with the best outcomes for our students, especially in our urban areas but really all over the state at a time when so many of our students are -- well, at a time when there are so many openings in our state that need students who are ready and prepared for the workforce.

But I think some of the ideas that you were sharing with me are quite innovative and I think will be very helpful and if you've already spoken about it, I apologize --

MR. CARDONA: No.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- but if you haven't, if you could just expand on some of that because I think the committee should hear about some for those ideas that you might have and ways in which you can bring focus around the table.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you, Senator. Yes, so board governance falls under one of those big buckets of work that I think the agency can do a better job proactively supporting.

If we look at districts as a system with many different parts, we have to look at what are the parts that would support positive -- great student outcomes.

And we have done a great job at the State Department of Education focusing on some of those systems but I think there are several systems that we need to do a better job focusing on in order to ultimately realize the potential of the students and of the district.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

So two of those systems that you made reference to our board governance systems. Regardless of how much money a district gets, if the board governance process is not effective, the outcome for those students will not be realized at the potential as if the board was a high functioning board aimed at not only improving student outcomes but being responsive to the needs to Connecticut.

So it's incumbent upon us to be more proactive in supporting healthy boards. Right. And providing a board support and board accountability where appropriate but working with them with partners. I say that as partners. That's critically important that we help them build their capacity to be effective.

Secondly, fiscal health. Many districts struggle with understanding the fiscal health or how to use good fiscal practices to get themselves out of a jam or how to best utilize federal grants in a way that aims to improve student outcomes.

So we have a responsibility as an agency to support districts with their fiscal health as we do with social emotional health, curriculum and academics. Board governance and fiscal health are the two areas that I think we need to be more proactive on.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Great, thank you very much for that. And is the State Board of Ed. looking at ways in which we are preparing our students for the thousands and thousands of openings at some of our manufacturing facilities such as Electric Boat or Pratt & Whitney or and even our manufacturing supply chain?

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

MR. CARDONA: Yes. We are actively engaged in the Governor's Workforce Counsel. I'm really pleased that there is a group of folks that are looking to really change this for Connecticut, really move the needle.

However, we are not waiting for that to come up with recommendations. We have restructured our agency to have an Office of Innovation and Partnership where that, the role of that person is to bring in our industry partners to the table to say how can you contribute to this overall plan of making sure that our high schools are giving students pathways to careers in advanced manufacturing, careers in the medical industry which is growing, the insurance industry.

And it's all regional, right. What works in the southwest part of Connecticut does necessarily work for the northwest. So we are engaging in that work. That's new work for the agency. That's a new department for the agency.

So we are engaging on that. We are not going to just wait for the workforce, we are going to be proactive on that as well.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you very much. And my last question is we have various models that we use in the state such as VO Ag schools or Rye Tech in Stamford or AIT in Stamford.

Charter, some public charters schools that we have which was mentioned. We also have P-tech schools as well. I think we have, I know we have one in Norwalk, we have one in Danbury I believe, maybe Waterbury is one and I think in New London at least. Can you just talk about those partnerships as well

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

and how they fit into kind of some of your overall goals for the state?

MR. CARDONA: Definitely. So those partnerships are critical for us to bridge that gap between what our students are learning and what the workforce needs are in Connecticut. And we have to be very deliberate and intentional about making sure that we're connecting with the P-techs.

With regard to our C-tech system, the Connecticut Technical Education System, they are doing a wonderful job making those connections. They are designed for that gap to be closed between the workforce and our schools.

However we don't have enough to meet the needs of the demand so we have to make sure that our comprehensive high schools are also offering options. That doesn't mean that we can't grow our tech system.

Quite frankly, I would love to see a second shift in all of our 17 technical schools so that students that are interested from the comprehensive high school, they can take classes at night, get a micro credential, or the underemployed adults in that community can look at that as a viable option to better economic prosperity for themselves.

So there is work to be done there but I think our comprehensive high schools and the partnerships with the P-techs and the industry partners are vital for Connecticut.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Yeah, thank you. And what I've come to find out is and you think about say, I'll just focus on my area because that's what I

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

know but Ry tech or AITE, even Rogers Middle School which I believe is in a district Center for Global Studies Norwalk and the P-tech program is that you don't have to duplicate everything 162 times.

MR. CARDONA: Right.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): You can have places where kids will go if those are the models that they want to have. So there is kids from Norwalk who to go to AITE and all the communities around that go to AITE and Stanford, same way with Ry Tech.

We believe we have a good model for P-tech for kids around to go from other communities to Norwalk for the P-tech program and I imagine the same is around the state as well. So the state can utilize --

MR. CARDONA: Right.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- its resources in ways in which to not duplicate efforts but in order to get -- but kids will go to those if they find that those are things that they're actually interested in.

MR. CARDONA: Yes, yes.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): And just again thank you for your service and you have a very capable staff --

MR. CARDONA: Yes.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- that is behind you there and others who are working hard so we thank you for taking on this opportunity.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you, Senator.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): We have been joined by Senator Hartley. Would you like to ask some questions, Senator?

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

SENATOR HARTLEY (15TH): Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome, Commissioner. I was pleased to have a chance to catch up with you earlier in the session and I'm grateful to have the opportunity once again to have you before us but probably most excited about you launching your term and your leadership. And so you come to us with an incredible CV and yeah, you've been in the trenches so you've lived it and you know really what it's like.

Some years ago I actually had an opportunity to teach and it was middle school and it was a good learning ground. (Laughter) You earned your stripes pretty rapidly.

So I guess just following up on some of the conversations we had a little bit earlier and working on the Commerce Committee and, you know, everybody's global mission about continuing to make this state be recognized for its skilled labor force which we always have been but it is much more of a challenge now and we are struggling. We all recognize the fact that we are educating students for jobs we don't even know what they are.

MR. CARDONA: Right.

SENATOR HARTLEY (15TH): And that's how rapidly everything is changing. And when I visit, in fact it was just a couple days ago I was in this room with a class and, you know, I was asking them so what do you think the language of the 21st century is.

And, you know, people were saying Spanish and Chinese and so forth and I agree, those are all

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

great. But I do have to disagree that the language of the 21st century is coding.

And when you think about it, there isn't anything that we do on a daily basis that isn't based on coding somewhere, somehow. I had a chance to test drive a Tesla the other day. It was like yeah, you know, talk about Sci-Fi.

But and so, you know, our kids are really good at gaming and so forth but that's a skill that we have to then translate into job ready.

And so we know that right now districts are straddled with curriculum requirements and computer science is basically an elective and not a requirement for graduation. I guess it's up to each district.

But I implore you to make that a central part of your mission because that is going to be the one thing that will distinguish our workforce going forward.

And when we look at where the emerging jobs are in the industries, they are all based and related to technology in some way, shape or form. And it translates on all level and you don't have to be a Ph.D. You do not have to be, you know, a quantum scientist. They're, -- you want to talk about a career ladder, I mean, there is a robust career ladder.

So I will leave you with just one thing I have just recently kind of come across and that is Jersey has started a robust coding club kind of a model which fits into districts very easily without being a

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

mandate and without a requiring, you know,
exponential resources to go with it.

And I think if we can on a statewide basis, try to
launch something like that and scale it, it will
have incredible results and multiplier effects.

So anyhow, you've got a lot on your plate going
forward. I'm from an urban school district. One of
our other very important missions is to have a
workforce that represents our students and
comprehensives school.

We in Waterbury have made some great strides on that
and you know the litany in terms of the
opportunities and things that we have to continue to
change to grow that work force. So those are all
obviously big priorities.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

SENATOR HARTLEY (15TH): But I just want to welcome
you --

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

SENATOR HARTLEY (15TH): -- and say I very much look
forward in however I can support you in my district
and otherwise I'm here.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you, Senator.

SENATOR HARTLEY (15TH): Thank you. Thank you, Mr.
Chair.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Senator Hartley, and
Representative Phipps, my vice House vice chair.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): So good morning, Commissioner.

MR. CARDONA: Good morning.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): So I was going to in the spirit of brevity try to go ultra-quickly but I think given our earlier conversations and how great the answers were, I think it's really important to make sure those are on the record and folks really understand your perspective on both from inside the classroom and as an administrator and what that will mean for all of our children and students in our community.

So just a few quick questions. In terms of equity for our students, what does equity look like for a Connecticut student? What should that look like? How would we know if there is equity or equity is not achieved?

MR. CARDONA: All students having an opportunity have the same options in school and options in life regardless of zip code or skin color.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): I think and for those that don't know, my day job I also work in a school. I think you've been an educator probably I think it was over a decade from when I first started my career in education going to things like PPT meetings and helping partners understand 504 plans and IEP's.

What other opportunity do you think for students that have special needs, what could the state do to be more supportive of their efforts?

MR. CARDONA: Just ensure that we have or we are looking at their outcomes, ensure that an IEP does not mean different expectations, maintain high expectations, that's the best we can do Representative.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

We have huge expectations for all of our learners regardless of what classification we might put them in as adults. All children have the opportunity to be successful and contribute and we have to ensure that we're pushing back if there are practices that limit potential for children based on whatever classification we put them in, whether it's, you know, a special needs learner or an English learner or, you know, gifted and talented student. So I think that's what we can do.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): I mean, I think you began to talk about it when the Chair spoke regarding students going to college and I think having that high expectation.

Can you talk about when members of our community say things like not all children or all students need to go to college or should go to college? What should that process look like or what does that mean to you and are there any obstacles or challenges in adopting a serious thought like that?

MR. CARDONA: Sure. So I'd have to start with I think to best answer that question to give you a little bit about myself, right. So if you were a betting man and the statistics that you bet on the statistic, you probably wouldn't think that I would go to college based on my background.

And just if you look at the data in Connecticut over the last 30 years, you would say that the probability, right.

So my thinking is you don't make decisions based around those probabilities. You make decisions based on every child has an opportunity to go to college.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

Fast forward, I want to a technical high school, many people said well technical high schools you're not really in, you know, that's not really gearing you to college. That's absolutely false.

So students from a technical high school have the same opportunity to go to college and should be prepared to go to college much like any other student.

With that said, I think we are naïve in thinking in Connecticut that there is only way to success and that's college. I believe that we have to carefully challenge the college or bust mentality or else we are never going to meet the demands that exist in Connecticut that are waiting for us, that we have heard about at this meeting today.

And if we don't do that well, New Jersey is going to step up, New York is going to step up, Rhode Island will. So we have to do a better job there saying career pathways are just a viable -- just as viable an option for students and that college doesn't always start at 18.

There are many early 20's who choose now I want to go to college, now I know what I want to do. But every student should be prepared to go to college if they so choose and every student should be prepared to be a productive member of a workforce if that's their direction that they want to head.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): Right now the ECS formula has gotten I think in some ways more fair, more equitable. Were there another suggestions that you would give to the legislative body about how to make that a better affordable or what should or what

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

could education funding look like for the state of Connecticut?

MR. CARDONA: That's a big question there. So I appreciate the efforts to equalize the playing field with the recent adjustments. I do. If it weren't for that, we would be dealing with a lot more issues in the state of Connecticut, school closures, inequities being acerbated. So that is the right direction.

And, you know, communities that are very under resourced or that are relying very heavily on local taxes and that's not working, it's really providing opportunities for kids that would not exist if that dint happen.

So I'm pleased with the direction that that's taking. Obviously we could do more programming with more funding but the decision to move in that direction sends a very strong message that the focus needs to be making sure we are equalizing the playing field and your actions have shown that.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): There have been several court cases around segregation in the schools and in school systems. What recommendations would you give for I think both the macro issue of segregations in our schools I think at the community level and then also what the segregation looks like inside the classroom.

MR. CARDONA: Sure.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): I know last year I was pleasantly surprised I visited two political science AP courses up at Middletown High just last Friday and in the class of about 15 students, there were

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

about one-third of the students were students of color which was shocking to me because it was very different than when I was in school. When I was in school it was me and I think in the other class it was Keenan, right.

So what could we do in order to make sure that all of our classrooms, especially the classes and rooms that you spoke about that are either dual enrollment or AP classes look like our, the demographics of our state?

MR. CARDONA: Sure. We should create a culture in the state of Connecticut where we are doing equity audits at all levels, right. Not just the State Department of Education but how are we helping districts developing that practice, that regular practice of looking at not only exclusionary practice data which unfortunately is if you disaggregate it there are subgroups of students that are more excluded than others but also opportunities for accessing high level courses or college level courses. Are those reflective of the demographics in front of you?

So creating that practice is something that we can support districts to do. And that's part of this overall framework that I mentioned before when I talked about board governance. I think having an equity lens is something that it's our job to make sure we are fostering that so that the micro level decisions are taking that into account.

And the macro level, you know, this -- all students benefit when they're in a diverse setting, learning setting, all students. So whatever we can do to support practices that promote racial reduction in racial isolation we're going to take it while making

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

sure that we are doing so in a way that supports all districts.

Now that's a very difficult task but I also support giving opportunities for folks to live in communities that maybe lack diversity and look at diversity through different lens that way as well.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): So what's the -- so and for instance in my hometown of Middletown, there is a neighborhood school where in the neighborhood it is predominantly a black and brown neighborhood because of the racial, what's considered a racial imbalance.

They took half of the neighborhood and now those students are now on a bus and are moving, and are being bussed all the way across town. And this community typically you move into the community because you want to be able to walk to your school, you want to be able to walk to downtown, walk to work. So a lot of these folks don't have cars and now have to rely on public transportation in order to get to school and the sort of like hang ups and obstacles that it would take in order to participate.

Also looking at our towns and municipalities in general, many of those are also segregated so what can the state do in terms of integration with the recognition that many of our overall neighborhoods and our municipalities are inherently or de facto segregated in the first place?

MR. CARDONA: Again, very complex response is needed at the state level. You know, I think its Connecticut Statute 226E where it requires certain percentage of students to -- a certain percentage of diversity based on the whole schools diversity

percentage and districts are often times putting in practices that are unintentionally hurting the population that it's intended to help. I think that what you're referring to.

We as a State Department of Education, our board review plans and have districts come forward to us explaining how they're providing opportunities for students to learn in diverse settings within the community. So within Middletown.

But often times, it results in a student sitting on a bus for 20 minutes going to a school that's across town. So it's very challenging. I think revisiting the legislation that requires that is important.

But I also think having conversations with our local boards of education and our local municipal leaders to talk about what does this mean when we have concentrations of black and brown kids in one part of your community and not in another?

Now typically you don't think Education Department is -- they don't get involved in that but if we are serious about providing diverse opportunities for learners to engage with one another, that is exactly the conversation that we are going to engage in with our local boards of education and our local municipal leaders.

And we have started some of that work already so that we could have the right people around the table having conversations about how that affects their outcomes in school.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): So thank you for that.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): So most folks don't know is that I'm a very proud Middletown guy, I mean, I talk about being a Blue Dragon every chance I can get. But my second home where I spent almost every Sunday growing up right on North Pearl Street in Meriden, so seeing another Meriden person across the aisle right now is going to bring tons of joy to my heart.

And I am really, really excited and thankful that I asked, I think some fairly tough questions that and sort of on the spot because I wanted to make sure that the public and everyone around this room knows the type of educational leader that we have that's going to lead our state forward in terms of education.

I am really thankful for what you have already done and what you are going to do for our district and I think in terms of one thing where I think a lot of times we talk about the best practices are modeling.

And the one thing that your office has done under your leadership in terms of responsiveness, I know when I call your office or email your office and have a question, when I call to you and need to schedule a meeting, you have been there each and every time and not even just promptly but even before I would even expect a response.

And that's the sort of we can call it constituent services or we can call it just community engagement and advocacy that I would hope that everyone in this state could look like.

So I appreciate your work, look forward to continuing working with you and if there is anything that I can do and my office can do, you have not only a big supporter but big fan. So --

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): -- thank you.

MR. CARDONA: And we are a service agency. And the folks behind me here are the ones that really make everything work so I appreciate their responsiveness to and I appreciate the shout out to North Pearl Street. I'm a Newton Street guy.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Phipps. And we have been joined by Senator Moore and by Senator Looney. Either one care to speak? Our president pro Tempe, Senator Looney.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon, Commissioner.

MR. CARDONA: Good afternoon.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): And congratulations on your nomination and also congratulations to all of your family who are here today and I see how proud they are of you and your achievements.

I wanted to ask you a couple of things. First of all, as commissioner and obviously someone who previously worked in the Meriden school system, what is your view on things that can be done to actually to modernize public education in the state?

My own view is that two are going to be continually hamstrung until we have achieved a great increase in the number of regional districts in this state. And that we are living with an anachronism that we have had for too long, that there are far too many small single town districts, many of them are losing population, school population. Yet they are in a

position where they refuse to consolidate, refuse to provide joint services.

I know there are some examples of regional cooperation and a mutual pursuit of combining, seeking supplies, going out into the market in combination and combining functions. But there is really a small amount of that compared to what would happen if we had a more regionalized system.

And you obviously have to deal with the reality of the system as it is but just your view, is there anything that you see that you can do in your role as commissioner to enhance and promote and incentivize regional cooperation at or things that you would recommend to us if we are looking to find ways to reduce the resistance that has always existed to further move us in that direction?

MR. CARDONA: Thank you for the question, Senator. Yes, I agree with you wholeheartedly that we have to evolve to make sure that we are meeting a demand and that we have to attack inefficiencies.

Growing up, in Meriden and serving for over 20 years in Meriden public schools, we had to be efficient, we had to find out what worked, how do we evolve, how do we compete with less resources. So that's the mentality that I brings to the agency.

We have started already. We have an Office of Innovation and Partnership and the director of that position is intended to -- the role of that position is to make sure that not only are we partnering with our industry partners but also looking for ways for districts to work together to solve problems that they're trying to combat separately throughout the state.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

We have 169 municipalities and many of them are working on the same problems and not talking to each other. And this agency has to do more to blur those lines and to provide incentives for students so that there is a shared services done more.

I once, my second week on the job when I did an education forum with the governor, I had a 10th grade student tell me, you know, I'm in a district that we only have 200 students in our high school. I don't have the AP offerings that my neighboring district has and colleges are not going to look at my transcript like they'll look at that.

How could I take those courses? And I'm thinking to my -- what does that school have that the other students might benefit from? So whether it's an after school program or something that the districts should be talking to each other. How do we as an agency promote that?

So there are things that we are going to be doing. We have an office for that the now. We didn't before. Six months ago we didn't have that office. We have that, we are going go to be monitoring that, we are going to be promoting that. We are going to be bundling that up through our partners in cabs case AFTCEA, case. They're all in on this to saying we need to be creative in how we provide services.

We have C-techs. We can be more creative in how we utilize those 17 beautiful facilities. You know, thanks to the support you've given them, they're state of the art. How do we get our neighboring communities to take advantage of that beautiful site so that at 3 o'clock the lights don't go off?
Right.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

The RESC's, we are set up to have Regional Education Support Centers provide service and capacity building. How do we as an agency and with your support, lift them up a little bit to provide the support that they were intended to provide? And look for those efficiencies more directly in support of the work that we are doing.

And then lastly you asked what can you do? So when we are talking about looking for ways to promote districts working together on issues that are important to Connecticut, how do -- how does the legislature support that by incentivizing those partnership that we're looking to see.

So that it is as much a ground up, bottom up approach as it is an approach that we support from the top down. So those are some thoughts on that, Senator.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Well, thank you and I appreciate your interest and your initiative in trying to find some ways to focus your department in a more formal way on that issue.

Frankly, a year or so ago it was a source of dismay I think that when we had the large influx of students coming from Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, came into a number of our cities. And in many of our urban districts actually have seen increases in their school populations while many of the small town and suburban district have not.

And Waterbury was one that had a pretty heavily populated district plus a surge of new students moving in from Puerto Rico and at the time, Mayor O'Leary came up with what I thought was a very good, practical, commonsense plan because he, as he said

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

most the towns in the region around Waterbury all had lost school populations substantially, up to 10 percent over the last decade.

And he came up with a proposal to send some of the newly arrived students from Puerto Rico to have their learning in the vacant space in some of the school buildings in the suburban towns that Waterbury would take care of sending, busing the kids there.

It was also going to send along with the kids the English as a second language teachers from Waterbury because there was almost no diversity in some of those small towns. He couldn't get a single taker for that proposal.

That, it just strikes me as something that is the kind of thing that just undermines unity in Connecticut that you have too many of these small town districts see themselves as sacrosanct fiefdoms and no matter how inefficient their operations are, they resist the larger scale of doing things in a unified, regionalized way.

So it just, it seems to be obviously this is sort of a third rail politically as sort of a this is a sort of a home rule with a vengeance but it's something that I think is not quaint any longer, it's something that's holding Connecticut back in terms of its advancement and also in terms of justice, economic justice and educational justice for our students.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Senator Looney.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Representative Davis, you have the floor.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And good morning, or yeah, now we are in the afternoon I guess. Good to see you. Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me prior to this --

MR. CARDONA: Sure.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): -- meeting. We had a very good conversation about some of the very topics that have already been discussed here so I won't repeat those.

But in your particular case, this Commissioner of Education is a unique position because you serve with a State Board of Education and how do you see that interaction in the position of Commissioner and would that State Board of Education policies there forth by them, how you'd implement them or would it be you making those policy recommendations to them and hoping that they go along with it? How do you see that interaction taking place?

MR. CARDONA: I see it being a very positive one. They support the implementation practices and create policy to ensure equitable implementation and outcomes so it's good to have that layer that's closer to the school house if you will, right.

And they provide a unique perspective from different parts of the state as well so having that guidance and leadership from the State Board of Education to ensure that implementation fidelity of policy is at the forefront I think is critically important.

And ultimately, when their goals while there may be differences in how things get done, if their goals align with that of our governor and our legislative

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

body, there is a synergy there that makes it more likely for the outcomes to take place the way they were intended.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): And with the State Board of Education it's kind of uniquely set up like you've just mentioned, people from different parts of the state perhaps brought in from different trades and I know you've mentioned prior to me coming down here the pathway to in the pipeline of getting students through the K through 12 system into the workforce potentially or into the higher education system. And that interaction with the trades and manufacturing but also other trades could be nursing, it could be something like that.

MR. CARDONA: Right.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): The vision that you have to be able to accomplish that pipeline and that pathway, you mentioned that you have this new Department of Innovation that's looking for those connections between local schools districts and manufacturers but if you could just expand on that real quick?

MR. CARDONA: Sure. I don't know if I mention it earlier but pre K-12 education is the best economic driver in Connecticut. I believe that.

We can talk about workforce development, but if we don't have a quality high school graduate, those jobs will remain unfilled.

So what I am suggesting is that we start earlier to create viable pathways with partnerships industry and I'll use industry but it could be medicine, it could be other fields, where our students are learning, but also getting experiences out there to

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

intern, to get credits where they are out in the field experiences.

So we have pockets of that, Representative. We have really good pockets. If you look on our website, learn together grow together Ct, that's a way for us to incentive districts are going things. We are highlighting best practices.

We have Bristol that does it well, Enfield does it well. I recently visited and I spoke to two superintendents who are partnering with a university to do pathways like that. So we have examples of it but we have to scale it and we have to make sure it's sustainable.

And some of those partnerships which was mentioned earlier might include a manufacturing hub that's available for 10 districts because there is not enough capital improvement money to build a manufacturing hub in every community. That makes no sense. That's not efficient.

But if we are creative and we think regionally how can we incentivize partnerships to do that, not only are we going to create efficiencies but we are going to create pathways that meet the demand of what's happening.

And if we don't do that well, as I said earlier, little pop up schools will do it or other states will do it and that will hurt our economy when our manufacturers leave. We have the responsibility to be aggressive.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Thank you. And I like to hear that, that we are looking to be aggressive about

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

trying to get that pipeline of people going straight from that K-12 into the manufacturing.

Just one more area topic and actually that we didn't get to discuss when we met prior here is reading and early intervention for those who do not have the skills of reading early on. And your views on that, because my personal opinion is that reading is the base of education.

MR. CARDONA: Sure.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): And I know that there is a lot of studies done with that too. But often times and even in my own districts, I represent an alliance district as well that reading seems to be something that's fallen behind and the intervention that's necessary to do that and representing smaller towns that have limited budgets bringing on those reading interventionists can be an issue sometimes.

So some, maybe a thought of as Senator Looney mentioned although we have different opinions on how to regionalize, one idea of, you know, maybe having these reading interventionists available to multiple districts at the same time or multiple schools --

MR. CARDONA: Sure.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): -- within those districts to make it so that access to that is greater and what role the State Board of Education and State Department of Education can play in something like that?

MR. CARDONA: Thank you for the question, Representative, and I want to throw out that while I'm talking about this is where we're going, I want to make sure that I'm clear that this work doesn't

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

start now, when I became commissioner. A lot of this work has happening before.

The computer science standards that were just supported happened well before I started as commissioner. I know Dr. Hickey has worked really hard with her team to develop, so a lot of this work is happening. We want to make sure we scale it up and continue to be aggressive in that area.

Thank you for bringing up reading. At the end of the day, if kids can't read it doesn't matter what pathway we're putting together into high school. So I appreciate that and I appreciate the acknowledgment that if we don't have a plan for that, then all the other stuff doesn't matter.

It's like, I think my staff might be tired of me making these analogies already. It's like a cake with nice frosting on it but with really poor batter. Like just, you don't want to eat the cake, right, but it has sprinkles on it, it's pretty. But the batter is not good.

We have to invest in the batter at the State Department of Education. A quality program that has good institutional core, good teaching, good connection with students and a quality content is what we do. That's our work.

So while I'm very eager to partner with others, I'm very eager to partner with other agencies, nobody should care about reading, third grade reading more, than the State Department of Education and we have to make sure that as part of our core work, we are doing that.

I'm really pleased that we were able to get two positions for curriculum support because like you mentioned many districts are spending a lot of time and energy duplicatively trying to come up with curriculum or tools, curriculum tools that just don't hit the standard, are not high.

So with the question with special education that was asked earlier, in many of our places, we're trying to reinvent the wheel and not talking to each other. What role does the agency have to provide high standards so that students have access to their grade level content or even pushed further and also have access to intervention models that would prevent students from being identified as special education when what they needed was a little better intervention. So a curriculum and quality access to materials is something that we are, we believe very strongly.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Davis. And if there are no further question or concerns from any of our committee members, I'd just like to thank again for being here and answering our questions and also congratulate you again on your appointment.

As you probably gathered, Dr. Cardona, many of my colleagues here are either educators or dabbled in education and then realized that their talents were better utilized (laughter) in other areas.

But they were able to get a feel for just what educators face and I'm glad that they did have that experience even if it was briefly because it gives them an appreciation for the educators that are out there in the trenches working with our young people.

Like I said, my wife and I were both teachers. We really, we were part of the early bilingual programs in the city of Hartford recruited by Maria Sanchez back in the day when the community realized it needed it.

And I also supported an effort by my state Senator, John Fonfara when we created a dual language program --

MR. CARDONA: Right.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): -- in the Hartford Board of Education and I know you have experience in bilingual education so I know that the Department will be in good hands.

And I can't let this, knowing this history of our community and having come in as a teacher in 1972 with \$60 in my pocket, and having worked 35 years in the Hartford Public School System with our kids and my wife and I committing to living in the city and still living in the city, and, you know, fighting for representation of our community, I can't let this moment pass without recognizing the fact that you are the first Latino and indeed the first Puerto Rican Commissioner of Education in the state of Connecticut.

And I say this not because you happen to be a fellow Puerto Rican but I say this because I know you are qualified individual, a family man, you're here. I know you put your heart into education. I tell people education is not being an educator is not a job. It's a vocation and your born a teacher and you die a teacher.

My wife says not everybody is your student, you know, you've got to slow down sometimes. But I always -- we always take an interest in what young people are doing. And I always ask young people what are you doing, are you still in school, are you majoring in something, you know, what are your career plans?

Because my wife and I want to see our young people succeed and I know the Department is in good hands. I know you have the same goal at heart and I congratulate you on your appointment as our first Latino Commissioner of education.

MR. CARDONA: Muchos gracias.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Mucho gracias (Spanish speaking). And that's it for --

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): -- this part of our public hearing. Yeah, you had one more question? Oh, yes. Before you leave, there's a question that we ask every one of our nominees, so don't take it personally.

Is there anything in your background that you feel could prove embarrassing either to the governor, to the legislature, to this committee?

MR. CARDONA: No, there's not.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you very much.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And you're excused now.

MR. CARDONA: Thank you for your time and consideration.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. VARGAS (6TH): All right. Great. That brings us to our second nominee, the Commissioner Designate for Commissioner of Social Services. Deidra S. Gifford.

Before you take the seat, Dr. Gifford, could you please raise your right hand? Would you promise to tell us the truth and nothing but the truth?

MS. GIFFORD: I do.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Please be seated. And as is customary, we allow all nominees to make an initial presentation the floor is yours.

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you, Representative, and good afternoon, Representative Vargas, Senator Duff, Senator Looney and the distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee.

My name is Deidre Gifford and I appear before you as Governor Lamont's nominee for Commissioner of the Department of Social Services. I'm honored by the Governor's appointment and for this opportunity to present testimony to the committee today.

Since beginning my service as Commissioner Designate last June, I have had the opportunity to meet and work with members of the General Assembly, my fellow commissioners and agency staff, some of whom are with me today and I'm grateful for that, as well as our service partners across the state.

I am grateful for the kind welcome that I have received and for the collaborative approach that we are taking on behalf of Connecticut residents.

Before I give you a sense of my background, a few words about the Department of Social Services. As

you know, DSS serves one million residents of all agencies in Connecticut and all 169 cities and towns.

We support the basic needs of children, families, older adults, including persons with disabilities. Together with our service partners at DSS, we support the health of nearly 850,000 residents through husky health including medical and dental services, behavioral health, prescription medications and long terms services and supports.

In addition, we help nearly 370,000 residents afford food and support Connecticut's economy with the federally funded Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program or SNAP.

And we support economic aid, independent living and home care, social work, child support, home heating aid and protective services for older adults. And these are just a few of the ways that DSS makes a positive difference in the lives of Connecticut residents.

In terms of my background, while I'm originally from California, I have been a New Englander for a good part of my life and now live in West Hartford. I received my medical degree from Cornell University Medical College and then trained in obstetrics and gynecology.

I also earned both my bachelors and master's degree in public health from the University of California at Los Angeles.

As a student, as a resident in training and as a practicing physician, I had the privilege to care for hundreds of women and their families, many of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

whom, most of whom were clients of the same programs that we administer at the Department of Social Services.

As their physician, I heard their stories, I met their families and I learned from them about the challenges that they were facing. These stories are always with me and they are what motivate me to do this work.

As Governor Lamont noted in his nomination announcement, my background includes working in government at both the state and federal levels. From 2012 to 2015, I served as the Medicaid director in the Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, having previously served as the agencies medical director.

During my tenure there, I advanced changes in the payment and delivery system to improve the quality of care and enhance the value of services in Medicaid.

Most recently from 2016 to 2019, I was the Deputy Director for the Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services at the federal office called CMS which oversees Medicaid and Medicare.

In this capacity, I was one of two senior career civil servants overseeing the Medicaid and CHIP program in all 50 states and the territories.

Also for eight years prior, I was cofounder and project director of Rhode Island's multi payer medical home demonstration which is one of the nation's first and most enduring multi payer -- payment reform initiatives.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

And I was the Director of Healthcare Policy and Programs for Rhode Island Medicare Quality Improvement Organization.

Since the Governor's nomination I have been privileged to serve with over 1700 staff members at the Department of Social Services and I can tell you that I have been very impressed with the dedication and the professionalism of our staff and the breadth and quality of our services.

Of course, as with all state agencies, we have had our share of successes and we have our share of challenges. Indeed, much has occurred at the Department over the past number of months and in the limited time we have, I'd like to share a few brief examples.

As you know, we are seeing a number of challenges on the SNAP front with new eligibility policies coming from Washington that will make it more difficult for many residents struggling to earn a living wage to obtain vital food assistance.

DSS has actively partnered with the governor and our attorney general to challenge these new restrictions.

On the positive side, as you know we participated in the resolution of the long standing disagreements with the Connecticut hospitals over Medicaid payments and user fees, with a new settlement in place that has been ratified by the legislature and signed by the Governor.

DSS will be moving forward now to partner with our hospitals on the important work of measuring and improving the quality of care for our members and we

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

appreciate the collaboration of the General Assembly in bringing this issue to closure.

Also, on December 1, the terms of a multi-year settlement agreement regarding Medicaid eligibility timeliness expired thereby releasing the Department from federal court oversight in this area.

We improved from processing about 80 percent of Medicaid applications timely in late 2013 to having exceeded 97 percent timeliness for the past 17 consecutive months. And I thank the dedicated staff of the Department of Social Service for working so hard to make those improvements.

And I thank the General Assembly for your support in providing us with the staff that we needed to do so. This supports Connecticut's position of having one of the top performing Medicaid programs in the nation.

Recently, Governor Lamont announced two executive orders aimed at reducing healthcare costs for Connecticut residents.

Executive order number 6 directs the Department of Social Services to convene an advisory board that will boast our ongoing efforts at DSS to control costs and increase quality of care standards for Medicaid, a program that accounts for over 20 percent of state expenditures

I look forward to reporting on our continuing progress in this area which includes developing a transparency strategy to help us become more accountable to the Governor, the General Assembly and the public.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

I'm happy to say that in Connecticut, I have been struck by the openness of my fellow commissioners to work across agencies to benefit the residents we serve. With leadership from the Governor, there is a lot of momentum in that direction that I hope to contribute to in the coming years.

Should I be confirmed, it is my priority to help DSS continue to be an agency that is a responsible steward of state and federal dollars with programs administered with high standards of integrity and diligence.

In closing, under Governor Lamont's leadership, I look forward to working closely with fellow state agencies and with the General Assembly and our many partners to ensure that we continue to offer the best possible level of service to state residents.

I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I appreciate your consideration of my nomination and I'm happy to answer any questions that you might have.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank very much for that presentation and congratulations on your appointment by the Governor as Commissioner --

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): -- of the Department of Social Services. I have had the opportunity to meet with you and also recently when there was a little concern in my district, we were able to get a meeting with community people and the Department and I found that the Department is very responsive to the community which is important.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

And I'd just like to say, you know, you have gone a long distance from being a medical doctor to now leading a bunch of MSW's and social workers out there trying to deliver these social services.

I have had a little experience over the years with this. Back in the early 70's when I came to Hartford as a young teacher, I was appointed by the then governor, somewhere in the late 70's, the Governor Ella Grasso to as a consultant to hold a series of public hearings regarding a department that used that used to control almost every aspect of social services in Connecticut which was called the Department of Community Affairs.

And it was the only department that dealt with every issue that had to do with social services. And we were able through the public hearings, through talking with people in the community, people felt that we needed to separate these, this agency into smaller agencies instead of one super agency.

And that's how we wound up with several agencies that work on different aspects of helping people and I think it was the correct decision because we were able to drill down many clients felt that in a larger agency like DCA, the Department of Community Affairs, that their issues were lost and that too many things fell through the cracks.

Now, we face a different issue which is the fact that we are drilling down, we are finding out more things about the needs of the community but in an age of limited and shrinking resources, sometimes we are hampered in terms of the ability to be able to resolve some of these issues.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

And you probably know what those issues are. You know, we have discussed the call lines, the wait, trying to get through the parents of adult children now that need services and are on a waiting list.

The fact that we have Medicaid funds are running low, a lot of needs, elderly populations living longer with more health needs and, you know, your past Medicaid experience and Medicare experience and your past jobs qualify you eminently to deal with a lot of these issues.

So what are your thoughts in terms of the resources the agency has? Do you think that it's adequate? I know recently we have a balanced budget and now we have some extra money. I know our Governor wants to put that in an emergency account which, you know, is a wise fiscal decision.

But there is also some pressure that's been building up over the years, especially with our partners in the nonprofit agencies that feel that they're doing more for less and they've been getting the short end of the stick for a long, long time and there is a lot of pressure building up that we need to address this with more resources. Any thoughts on that subject?

MS. GIFFORD: Yes. Thank you, Representative Vargas. To your point about the importance of collaboration across the human service agencies which I think is connected to your point about efficiencies and resources, I -- as I mentioned in my remarks, and I mean it, I'm delighted to be among a group of human service commissioners who are very focused on working together and optimizing our services for the residents that we serve. And that is relevant in many different ways.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

First of all, we need to do a better job of sharing data because we have so many of the same clients that we serve in different agencies and making sure that our systems are talking to each other so that we are not duplicating effort on behalf of the same families who are receiving services from different agencies.

So that's one important way that we can gain efficiencies and do a better job of serving our residents.

The other thing is around programmatic alignment across the agencies. And, you know, a good example of that is the work that we are doing to address the opioid crisis. We have been working very closely with our partners at both DCF and DMHAS.

We have brought some grant money into the state and we are working on apply for some more federal resources to continue to address the opioid crisis and to do a better job of maximizing our resources across different agencies.

There are several agencies that administer Medicaid funding and so in collaboration with those agencies, we are always looking to find ways to maximize the amount of appropriate federal dollars that we can bring into the state. And we have, you know, continued to uncover ways to do that by further collaboration.

I would also in closing just mention that we have been, you know, thanks to the collaboration of the General Assembly, been given new positions for our continuing work to help individuals transition from nursing facilities into the communities and to continue to bolster our quality assurance program to

make sure we are going our best job around fraud. And so we have been able to begin some hiring in those agencies, in those parts of the agency as well.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well thank you very much for that statement. You know, I'm -- as an educator, we are kind of kindred professions to the social workers and although I didn't have an MSW when I was president of the Hartford Federation of Teachers, I worked with the UConn School of Social Work and I was a field supervisor for community organization for the students that were majoring in social work and so I had an opportunity to collaborate with a lot of the social workers.

You know, it seems like teachers become social workers, counselors, parents. Societies put a lot of pressure on us and it's good to know that we have been professionalizing the social work profession and that because in the past we had many people that used the title social worker with very little training, very free credentials and you wondered if they did more damage than good, especially in the addiction service agencies.

You know, when you had scandals of people turning out to be enablers rather than the people that are helping people so I'm glad that we have somebody with your experience, with your background that understands these issues and is trying to make sure that we get the most bang out of each dollar that our tax payers, you know, contribute to the coffers of the state of Connecticut.

And at the same time that, you know, we want to know that we have a person with a big heart for those people that we are serving out there because it's in

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

the end the only reason these agencies exist is because of the need in the community.

Well, without further ado, I'll open it up to the committee with my co-chair here.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And good afternoon, Commissioner, it's good to see you again.

MS. GIFFORD: Good afternoon.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Can you talk a little bit about the Chairman Vargas reached a little bit of it in a way. But if you could talk a little bit more about kind of some of the work you've done or that is being done to help those who interact with DSS often.

As we know, during the Malloy administration, there was a significant amount of work that was done in order to use technology not from the last century which is sad to say, but when the reason why I think a lot of governors didn't want to do that is because of the fact that that's disruptive to do and it means that there is going to be a time of transition, there is going to be a time when it will be more -- sometimes creates confusion and creates moments when there's time when there may be more people can't even get through.

And the last commissioner, Commissioner Brumby had talked to us about the wait times for our constituents and trying to get through to a live person or do things more online.

Can you talk a little bit more about that, especially as there are probably now fewer staff than there was maybe five, 10 years ago at the

Department and what's being done in order to ensure that as people interact with their agency that its, they're having an experience that's not completely frustrating but it is also maybe positive. Thank you.

MS. GIFFORD: You're welcome. So, yes, this issue is one of concern for us as well, ongoing concern at DSS but I want to share that we have made significant progress.

As you mentioned, Senator, there has been a large investment on the part of both the federal government and the state in modernizing our technology systems at DSS.

And we do that in partnership with the Access Health Connecticut who also does a lot of the eligibility for our Medicaid program. We field about 44,000 calls per month at DSS in our field offices and Access Health Connecticut fields about another 70,000.

Over half of our calls at DSS are around SNAP and most of the calls at Access Health, virtually all of them are obviously around healthcare benefits.

We have reduced our call wait time since 2018 by 80 percent. We were at 75 minutes of wait time which is obviously far too high in 2018 and down to 15 minutes average wait time in 2019. 15 minutes is still too long but it's obviously a vast improvement from the 75 minutes that it was before.

We have done that by investing in some in technology and some in people. You mentioned, Representative Vargas, the Connecticut School of Social Work. We have a contract with that school that does, has a

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

very structured training program for our eligibility staff and we do a lot of training for the eligibility staff to make sure that they know how to handle calls.

We have continued to improve our technology so that individuals can -- if they just have a question, they can just get that question answered either through an automatic phone line or by going online to check in their account and we are continuing to work on and improve those technologies.

Later this year, we will be rolling out a new, further improved voice technology when individuals call that will not require them to stay on hold, they'll be able to hang up and get a call back and not lose their place in line so they can go about their business and then be called back on a phone line that they leave.

So we have made progress but I acknowledge and share your concern about continuing to make sure we are doing the best job that we can to serve the million people that rely on us.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): And thank you for your answer. Is there -- we also hear from the folks who work at senior centers and others who call in to the number I guess as well and they're almost representatives of DSS because that's where people go to then call your agency. And while they're not employees of yours, they almost are and in essence, an extension of your agency.

Is there any ability for them to have a ways in which to reach the Department or somebody on some of the complicated questions or maybe some of the uncomplicated questions in a way that may be faster

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

for them since many of them work for non-profits and they're, as I said they are stretched as well or ways in which --

MS. GIFFORD: Yes.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- they can get some information in a more timely way.

MS. GIFFORD: Yes. So right now, we have a single phone line and individuals calling for any reason are routed through that single line. The new phone system that I mentioned that will be installed later this year will allow individuals to route more quickly to the long term care unit and bypass hopefully some of the waiting that they're doing now.

We have a dedicated unit for long term services and supports. Those eligibility determinations are much more complex than the standard Medicaid application and those phone calls can often be long and require repeated back and forth because individuals need to provide a lot more information.

So the answer to your question, Senator, is yes, we are working on a strategy now that would allow those individuals to be diverted around the general number and go directly to our long term care unit.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you. And you mentioned long term care. So if you talk a little bit about that because when we met, you spoke about how there is some issues that are faster in nature to resolve than some other ones that are a little more complicated and those take a little bit longer on the phone.

So if you could just for the sake of the committee to help all of us understand it a little bit better, you could just break that down a little bit more.

MS. GIFFORD: Sure thing. So a standard, we are talking about Medicaid here. With a standard Medicaid application which is the vast majority of our members, I think it's around 00 percent of our members have a standard, what we call modified adjusted gross income, MAGI Medicaid, is based on a few factors.

After the ACA was passed that the application process was simplified and it's based on income, family size, citizenship, and a few other relatively easy to answer questions and things that are easy to verify through electronic means.

So those are the applications that we can process generally in less than 24 hours and which are easier to determine yes or no.

In general, the more complex Medicaid, individuals with disability and those applying for long time services and supports we have are required by federal rules and laws and regulations to do things like asset verification.

We need to sometimes look at transfers of assets. And then there is an entire, if its long term care, there is an entire clinical assessment that needs to happen in order for us to determine what level of service the individual appropriately should receive.

So that sort of by its nature, Senator, is a much more complicated process and often requires some back and forth between the individuals, their family, their representative and our staff.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you, Commissioner, for the answer. So understanding, you know, the role that you play and the large amount of budgeting that does go to DSS, what are some of the, you know, when you first came in, we have the hospital settlement now which I'm sure is something you're rolling your sleeves up on for as well and how that gets rolled out.

What other, like if you could list like maybe two or three other goals of yours for the agency during your time as commissioner.

MS. GIFFORD: Yes. So Connecticut has as I mentioned, a very strong Medicaid program. We have many of our indicators of quality and health that are some of the best in the country.

So I'm very proud to be -- to have joined the agency at this point in time but we do have more that we can do in terms of making sure that the investment that we do make in the Department of Social Services is getting the best health outcomes for our members.

Because health and well-being obviously as Representative Vargas alluded to, that's what we are here for. And we need to make sure that the dollars we are spending are being spent effectively and actually getting the outcomes that we are looking for.

And so I have spent the bigger part of my career trying to understand how to use insurance which is basically what the Medicaid program is to drive improved health outcomes. And that's about measuring and then changing the way we pay in order to drive both improved outcomes.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

So one of my goals, Senator, is to continue to move the Connecticut Medicaid program forward in terms of payment and delivery system reform. There is a lot of interest on the part of providers to doing that, to partnering with the Department.

As soon as I arrived, you know, was being asked for meeting with lots of different types of groups who wanted to talk about payment and delivery system reform and how we can advance our program. So that's a goal.

I would say partnering as I mentioned earlier with our sister state agencies particularly DMHAS. Behavior health issues are a very large part of what we do in Medicaid.

Medicaid generally is the largest payer for behavioral health services in the country and we are an essential component to not only address the opioid crisis, but addressing behavioral health for both children and adults.

So partnering with DCS, DMHAS, the Office of Early Childhood and doing the best job we can to address mental health issues is another goal.

And finally, I would mention maternal health outcomes. I've shared that my background is in obstetrics and gynecology. We need to do better around the country and in Connecticut in the disparities that we're seeing in maternal birth outcomes.

And so we have been working on some strategies to address that and we will be working over the course of this year in partnership with you all to come up with some new payment strategies that we hope can

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

both make sure we are being efficient but also driving the health outcomes that we want to see.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Great, thank you. That's the end of my questions. I just want to mention one thing.

There was a recent audit from our state auditors regarding a contract that DSS had on I believe it was Rides for Seniors. I'll get more information for that to you but I just hope that will be taken a look at carefully and reviewed.

That was an issue that many of us heard from our constituents on the front lines and that the agency will take very seriously.

MS. GIFFORD: We will.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you.

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Senator Duff. Yes, Senator Looney.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon, Commissioner.

MS. GIFFORD: Afternoon.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): And congratulations on your

--

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): -- on your nomination. In your opening remarks you mentioned the Governors executive order number six, directing DSS to convene an advisory board that will bolster ongoing efforts

at DSS to control costs and increase quality of care standards for Medicaid which takes up such a substantial part of our budget.

Is that advisory board still being constituted or are you still in the process of making appointments to it?

MS. GIFFORD: Yes. It is still being constituted.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Okay. And yeah, I think that could be very valuable if it is -- if proper and representative choices are made representing a range of interest and experiences to be on there.

So I'm glad to see that's in the -- how soon do you anticipate finalizing the membership of that advisory board?

MS. GIFFORD: As it happens, Senator, I believe as we speak DSS is posting a solicitation for letters of interest from the categories that are named, individuals in the categories that are named in the execute order. And I believe the closing date we had for letters of interest is three weeks from today, so early March.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Three weeks from today. So then you anticipate shortly after that you'll make the selections of the advisory board?

MS. GIFFORD: Yes.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Okay, good. All right. Yeah, because I think that could be quite beneficial.

Another thing I want to ask you about is the issue of Medicaid eligibility through buy in programs for working people with disabilities. And obviously

different states have different rules on that and different levels of eligibility.

My staff made an inquiry and asked OFA about this a while ago and OFA said it had reached out to DSS and that DSS didn't have the information to be able to provide a fiscal impact at this point and did not have detailed breakdown of income level of the recipients or spousal income or asset levels of recipients.

And I would hope that you might be able to compile this information because I think there really is something to be looked at here because many of our neighboring states have different asset levels and some have no asset level asset limits at all.

For instance, Massachusetts has a, in terms of monthly income limits, asset limit for individuals, asset limits for couples. And Massachusetts has none as long as people are disabled and also the monthly premiums are relatively modest as well in Massachusetts.

So New York also has -- they have a higher asset limit than we have as does I think Rhode Islands is 10 and 20, ours is 10 and 15.

So it would seem to me that this is a category of people who are in great need and would like to hear your views on increasing access to those who are disabled to have the option of participating in Medicaid through a buy in program.

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you, Senator. I am not familiar with the specifics of our program that you are referring to but I would certainly be happy to look into the program that we have here and in

JOINT COMMITTEE ON 11:00 a.m.
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

neighboring states and see that we might be able to do to address the concern that you're talking about.

Certainly the benefit package in Medicaid tends to be because individuals with disabilities are one of the most significant constituencies that we serve, the benefit package in the Medicaid program does tend to be one that can be more favorable than commercial insurance for individuals with disabilities.

So I understand the point that you are making and we would be happy to take a second crack at the question that you asked and see if we can provide you what some more information.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): I appreciate that. Thank you, Commissioner.

MS. GIFFORD: You're welcome.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Any further questions or remarks? Representative Davis?

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Thank you and thank you, Dr. Gifford. Congratulations on your appointment --

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): -- as commissioner. Obviously your Department oversees a large budget or at least a large flow of money from the federal government to the state government involved.

And there have been reports from the federal government that federal Medicaid fraud is a significant issue and that could lead to savings for states quite significantly because of the state match to those Medicaid programs.

And then I was wondering since you've taken over in your position as the Commissioner Designate what efforts have been made to try to crack down on potential Medicaid fraud?

MS. GIFFORD: Certainly. So we have had actually a number of significant provider related fraud occurrences that have been uncovered and addressed since I began last June. Those were in all of those cases, the results of months and years long investigations in order to gather, you know, the evidence that was necessary to identify the fraudulent activity which in some cases were very significant.

So we have a very strong quality assurance unit, you know, you all over the years have provided support to the Department to develop that unit. It's very robust. We partner with the states attorney and the AG's office on a regular basis.

We have also, you might be interested to know, recently invested in some new software that's looking at our billing patterns to help us identify potentially fraudulent claiming patterns that use a lit bit of an artificial intelligence type of approach to look at red flags that we should put a second pair of eyes on. So we are beefing up our efforts into at direction as well.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): And within your Department, you have investigators that look at these potential red flags or issues that could be coming and do they make then a recommendation to the states attorney office to then say okay these are our findings, you take it or how does that partnership work about potential actual prosecution of somebody who is committing these frauds.

MS. GIFFORD: Right. Well, if it's a -- obviously if it reaches the level of criminality, then yes. There would be a referral to the Medicaid fraud control unit. As soon as we have a credible, you know, allegations of fraud we would partner with them.

Other times and the most common occurrence is and I want to clearly state that the vast majority of providers in the Medicaid program are diligent, honest and very dedicated providers and we are very grateful for their partnership and their participation in the Medicaid program.

We have very high levels of provider participation in Medicaid in Connecticut. It's something we should be very proud of. So I just want to clearly state that this is not to paint Medicaid providers with a brood brush.

But sometimes when we do audits, we find just mistakes in billing and, you know, the Department and the provider will typically resolve those and there is oftentimes some sort of financial settlement involved but when there is a fraud allegation then that would result in a referral.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): And are there similar investigators or individuals looking into the, some of the other benefit programs like SNAP or EBT --

MS. GIFFORD: Yes.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): -- as well.

MS. GIFFORD: Yes.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): And we see -- we read reports of EBT fraud obviously or use of EBT cards, cash

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

withdrawals especially in areas maybe where they shouldn't be allowed to do those withdrawals. I understand there is federal guidelines but each state is then given the opportunity kind of set those rules and regulations.

In Connecticut I believe it's the, they can withdraw up to four times from a casino or from a strip club or a liquor store before they even get those benefits cut off, you know, they get warned three times, sometime fined the second time or third time but allowed up to four times to withdraw that cash. And is that standard with other states giving people that many opportunities to withdraw from federally prohibited areas?

MS. GIFFORD: I would be happy to look into that for you, Representative. I don't know off the top of my head how our rules compare with other states on SNAP.

I will tell you that it's been striking to me since coming to DSS in talking to our community partners and to others who deal directly with the public, that food insecurity continues to be a, you know, an issue for low income individuals.

So again, as I mentioned with the providers, although of course inappropriate use of these programs is never something that we would condone, I just want to point out that most individuals are using these benefits for the appropriate purposes.

But as to your specific point about, you know, non-permitted locations for withdrawals and how we compare to other states, I would be happy to get the detail for you and provide that.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. DAVIS (57TH): No, that's fair and I just asked that question as a policy maker, you know, something to look into as we try to find ways to make sure that the individuals that do, you know, have these benefits they use them the right way that they have access to those funds.

Because as Chairman Vargas mentioned, you know, we are living in a world sometimes with limited amount of resources and we want to make sure that if these benefits are available for people that truly do need them that they have access to those benefits and that the money isn't wasted or used elsewhere.

And the final question and I'll ask the same of the auditor, Auditor Kane when he comes up too but the issue that they're facing in the Auditor's Office with third party vendors and having access to information to verify these types of activities.

My understanding is that they're continuing to have difficulty accessing specific data in order to check either benchmarks that DSS has in contracts with these vendors or checking on where these withdrawals are taking place or at least being used.

And I know a few years ago in Waterbury there was a store that, you know, only had inventory of a certain amount of eligible items but was supposedly transactions of millions of dollars' worth of products coming through and those types of things that are not common thankfully but ones that we should be able to have our auditors be able to look at more stringently.

How is that interaction working with our vendors and trying to come to an amiable resolution that we're not paying for the very data that we need in order

to make sure that we are providing the best services as possible.

MS. GIFFORD: Yes. So we agree, Representative, that the state auditor should have access to the data that the state has access to in order to perform their auditing requirements. No disagreement there.

It's my understanding is correct in the particular case that you are talking about, there was -- the auditors were in fact given access to our data warehouse, the vendors data warehouse.

I think where there may have been some disagreement was in asking for some additional analytic work to be done that was not already existing and how that was going to play out.

So I think that's where the disagreement was but there is no disagreement about the importance of the state auditors having access to state data.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): And moving forward, is it -- obviously these contracts come up for renewal or go out to bid again, is that something that DSS is going to be looking for in the next contract coming forward that the state auditor or the State Department of Social Services would have access to that information, perhaps that additional analytical information beyond what these other contracts provided for?

MS. GIFFORD: Well, I believe we have -- we likely have standard contracting language already with our vendors that requires them to provide data if requested by the auditors.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

But it would be on us in terms of whether there was an additional analytic question that we had never asked the vendor to calculate, that would be part of what we would need to reprocur in the next go round.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Thank you.

MS. GIFFORD: You're welcome.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Davis. I would just like to mention that we have also been joined by Representative D'Agostino from Hamden and Senator Formica from the 20th District. Representative Yaccarino, you have the floor.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair and thank you, Dr. Gifford, and just a couple questions and congratulations on your appointment.

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): A couple years ago we passed Medicare savings, we bolstered it but we wanted to have an asset test for seniors that I don't know if you are familiar with the Medicare savings that covers the donut hole for seniors for coverage and visits.

How do you feel about an asset test because I get complaints from senior centers that from the director's that there should be an asset test because people are using it but they have, their assets are quite high?

And I think if we could -- well, let me -- I think we should have one because I think it opens the door for more people for other services. So I don't know how you feel about that.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

MS. GIFFORD: Yeah, I think that it's always a balance in Medicaid and when you're talking about providing benefits and making them available to individuals in a way that doesn't present excess barriers to accessing the benefits but striking the balance between making sure that only individuals who truly need the benefit are using it.

I know there has been some back and forth in Connecticut about asset tests and whether or not that was something that the state wanted to start to impose around the Medicare savings program. I think it's a common practice in other states --

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): It is.

MS. GIFFORD: -- for there to be, I believe it is, yes.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): So you'd be supportive of all that?

MS. GIFFORD: Well, I would probably want to look at the specifics in terms of what the actual asked -- proposed asset tests were and, you know, what the impacts would be on the individuals with the individual that would potentially lose their Medicare savings program if we were to imply -- to apply an asset test. But I do think it's something that, you know, is worth looking at.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Thank you.

MS. GIFFORD: You're welcome.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Just another question because there are so many unfortunate people that drug addictions or mental health addictions which eventually need social services.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

So you did mention you worked with DMHAS and I think other agencies but you don't work with the Department of Labor.

Do you ever, would you ever consider having a like a work study for people that are on social services that are healthy young men and women that are coming off addiction but need a job and need some stability.

MS. GIFFORD: Yes.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): They have the, they use the social services of the state and that's fine but some coordination between the Department of Labor Workforce Alliance and different -- because what happens is if they can't get a job by using the social services and then if they have so much time on their hands, they're many times back and doing drugs and alcohol.

MS. GIFFORD: Yes, so I did not mention the Department of Labor but we have been collaborating with Commissioner Westby and Deputy Commissioner Bartolomeo's since I began. We actually with leadership of our Deputy Commissioner Brennen, launching a pilot program with DOL exactly around some of the issues that your addressing.

We are also, DSS is very pleased to be part of the Governors Workforce Board and serving on the Supportive Services Subcommittee of that Workforce Board which is looking at some of the very issues that you're talking about, Representative, in terms of individuals either entering the workforce for the first time or reentering after an addiction or after being justice involved.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

What kind of supports can we make sure we are putting in place to ensure that they not only receive the training but they can remain employed in a sustainable way and there is a lot that DSS does provide that can be helpful to those individuals and we want to make sure that working with Department of Corrections, Department of Labor, and our other partners we are doing our best there.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Thank you for doing that. I think it's so vitally important because I, it sounds like its fairly new, you're just, you're initiating it buy it's so vitally important for people that never choose to become a drug addict or an alcoholic but need the system.

But if you don't have some, something so I congratulate you for that and lets, we should work together and bolster that so thank you and I support your nomination.

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Yaccarino. And, yes, Representative Godfrey.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon.

MS. GIFFORD: Good afternoon.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): So glad you're here. We had a nice discussion about week or so ago. I just want to touch on one issue you raised and I am on the board of directors of a nonprofit called APEX in western Connecticut.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

It started life like 40 years ago, it was the Aids Project Greater Danbury but has evolved into covering. We found that a lot of people who are using our services needed others, other services for example it, we do the needle exchange for Danbury Hospital, that kind of thing.

And you mentioned the opioid crisis and we are finding that that to be a very big, on the ground, practical issue. Like many non-profits we are dealing with your agency, we are dealing with public health and the collaboration on your level among those departments that you alluded to I think are very important.

The government tends to sequester its help in silos but I'm, I'd like you to expand a little bit more on your work with other state agencies and certainly I hope with municipal agencies and non-profits.

MS. GIFFORD: Sure. So, Representative, there is a structure which is called the Behavioral Health Partnership which predates me coming to DSS but that is a multi-agency partnership that actually oversees the administration of all of the Medicaid benefit around behavioral health.

So whether it comes through DMHAS or it's overseen by us or DCF or DDS, there are staff that meet regularly and oversee a single vendor who helps us, helps the state administer that benefit. So that has been a very effective structure and one on which we want to build.

We were fortunate to receive around two and a half million dollars this past year from the federal government to begin planning how to expand our

services, further expand our services to address substance use disorder.

That was a multi-agency effort to get that planning grant and we will be using that to apply for further federal dollars under a Medicaid demonstration waiver.

And it also gives us, having receive that smaller grant, makes us one of a very small pool of states who can apply for even further federal reimbursement for opioid treatment.

And all of those have been multi-agency efforts and both at the commissioner level and at the staff level we have a very strong partnership around this crisis.

REP. GODFREY (11TH): I'm very glad to hear that. And certainly best wishes continuing that particular effort. You've got quite a challenge that DDSS is a huge department with a lot of different sub agencies all helping people in need.

And just to touch on the asset test question. About a third of my district are individuals over 60 so I'm very attuned to elderly people like myself who are dealing with our own issues.

And I am happy that you said you wanted; you would want to see a particular -- the language for an asset test because I certainly would not want to start throwing senior citizens out of their homes because of an asset test. So thank you for being alert to that issue. I appreciate it.

MS. GIFFORD: Welcome.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Godfrey. Any further questions or comments from committee members? If not I -- yes, Senator Looney.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, just one additional question. Commissioner, I wonder if you would comment on the Health Information Exchange, the HIE that's being developed and how that's operating and organized.

MS. GIFFORD: Happy to. Yes, DSS has a very large role as you may know, Senator Looney, in the Health Information Exchange and we have been working very hard with the Office of Healthcare Strategies to finalize a memorandum of understanding between our two agencies around the operation of the exchange.

I did a, I have done a lot of work on health information exchange over the course of my career and they can be tricky.

As we know here in Connecticut, we have had some experiences that didn't go as planned and so this new effort is aimed at addressing some of the barriers that were encountered the last time around.

But I do believe in the potential of health information exchange that it can reduce costs and more importantly improve outcomes so that individuals are not receiving duplicate services, so that hospitals and providers can see the results of care that was provided not in their own organization.

So I think it's important that we continue to vigorously pursue an effective health information exchange while at the same time making sure we are meeting certain milestones.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

That's been part and parcel of the work that we have been doing with OHS is to define what are the important milestone in terms of participation and a sustainable funding model to make sure that this time when we build the exchange we are building one that we know will be easily accessible by providers and that we will have a sustainable model of funding.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Okay. Thank you very much, Commissioner.

MS. GIFFORD: Welcome.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Senator Looney. Vice Chair Phipps.

REP. PHIPPS (100TH): And, Commissioner, Doctor, thank you for being here. Just wanted to give a quick anecdote, so didn't have any questions because of the comprehensive conversation that we already had buy I know one of the things that I care about given Wesleyans in my district and also the (inaudible - 02:15:01) population in my district to, there is things that I was concerned about around access in telehealth and especially for those that are on husky.

And the quick answer that you replied was that I'm already working on it and that sort of proactiveness is exactly what we need in state government and administration and so I appreciate your work and look forward to working with you more.

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you, Representative.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Phipps. Further questions or remarks from Committee members?

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

If not I'd just like to add a comment. Years ago when I was president of the Hartford Federation of Teachers, we -- all our staff were trained with the program that was put together by the United Way, those days called the United Way of Greater Hartford, now it's United Way of North and Central Connecticut.

But they used to put together a training program for anyone that wanted to train in being a referral agent to the all the safety net agencies that existed in the greater Hartford area.

And those of us who worked at the Hartford Federation of Teachers would take the training so we, when one of our teachers would run into issues of a personal nature and not of a union nature, we would -- we were able to know exactly where we could send them to get those kinds of services and support.

And I was just wondering, you know, because that kind of thing like an ombudsmen whether you work at the Aetna, whether you work at the Phoenix, or wherever you work in the private sector, public sector, having people have that kind of expertise in terms of what is available in terms of human services is I believe a great asset. And I was just wondering if the United Ways are still engaged in that kind of training?

MS. GIFFORD: I have not become aware of that specific type of training. I think in large part the function that you're describing is carried out by United Way 211.

And we have a very strong partnership with United Way 211 at DSS and we rely on them heavily to do a

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

lot of the referral and education work that you were talking about.

So that work is ongoing and I couldn't comment specifically about whether the teacher training aspects of it is still is a part of that program.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And do you know if there is any like booklet that, you know, explains if this is your problem, these are the resources available to you.

If you have an alcohol problem, if you have a drug addiction problem, these are the kinds of agencies or back up support. Has anybody put anything comprehensive together like that?

MS. GIFFORD: Yes. United Way is specifically that is what the 211 resource is about and they have an extensive and keep and extensive inventory of all of the resources available in the community for a wide variety of social service needs.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well that's good because it is very confusing and sometimes people need help from more than one, you know, they may need help from a food pantry and they may need help from some other --

MS. GIFFORD: Yes.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): -- service provider. Sometimes from multiple service providers and sometimes there is overlap in services. Sometimes very difficult to really sort it all out so any help that the community can get in terms of that, of navigating all those issues would be great.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

So and I want to thank you for being here today and answering our questions and I know you'll do a great job. You have the experience and the know-how and I'm sure we will hear great things from DSS.

But before I let you go, I have to ask you the question I ask all nominees. Is there anything in your background that you believe might prove embarrassing to the governor, to the legislature or to this committee?

MS. GIFFORD: No, sir.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you very much for your time. And --

MS. GIFFORD: Thank you, I appreciate your consideration.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): All right. That brings us to our last nominee but if our Auditor, Robert Kane, would just give us a minute, I'd like to give the committee, put the committee in recess for a couple minutes just for a stretch.

RECESS:

REP. VARGAS (6TH): (Gavel) Back in order. Please take your seats. Before our state auditor takes the chair, please raise your right hand. Do you promise to tell us the truth and nothing but the truth?

MR. KANE: I do.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Please be seated. And as is customary, the floor is yours for an introductory statement.

MR. KANE: Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairmen Duff and Vargas, Senator Looney, Ranking Member

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

Perillo, members of the Legislative -- and Executive and Legislation Nominations Committee. It's hard to believe that it's already been three years since I came in front of you as the nominee for state auditor.

Let me again formally thank Senator Fasano and Representative Klarides for their unwavering support and the trust they have given me with their re-nomination.

The Auditors of Public Accounts continues to be your eyes and ears in state government. We are always available as a resource to legislators and their staff.

In the short time since my arrival, the auditors have worked side by side with the General Assembly in a truly bipartisan manner that can serve as a role model for every level of government.

Our office has collaborated with Senator Fasano and Representative Verrengia on a special review of the culture at the Connecticut lottery, worked closely with the comptroller limbo to pass legislation regarding the reporting requirements at DECD and reformed the relationship between the state and special education providers and legislative committees.

During 2019, our auditors completed 53 audits of state and quasi-public agencies and made 371 audit recommendations. During the past year, these agencies have implemented approximately 52 percent of our prior recommendations.

In addition, we continue to expand our use of data analytics to better identify issues at state agencies and uncover waste, fraud and abuse.

We increased the level of support our IT unit provides to our field audit teams to sort and aggregate data trends in a manner that enhances the auditor process.

Furthermore, we will continue to evaluate the state's information technology structure for effectiveness and determine whether state systems adequately maintain the integrity of data, protect against breaches of privacy, and ensure proper safeguards are in place to protect against fraud.

In the future, we intend to add to our information technology audit capabilities with enhanced data, analytics and additional IT audit resources.

Public Act 17-2 of the General Statutes required joint Legislative hearings on our audit reports at the discretion of committee chairs. Over the past few years, my fellow state auditor, John Geragosian and I along with numerous audit staff testified before various Legislative committees on the findings and recommendations in our audits.

These hearings are a valuable tool for Legislators to familiarize themselves with our work and provide them an opportunity to interact with our front line auditors to gain a more in depth understanding of the issues raised in our audit reports.

In 2019, we participated in two public forums related to issues surrounding the management of the Connecticut Port Authority.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

In addition, we have participated in multiple informational forums regarding various issues at the Connecticut state lottery, UConn Health Center, DECD, DOC and the State Department of Education.

We updated the look for our reports to make them more reader friendly. Information technology services helped us internally developed an entirely new website that allows users to more readily and easily access our work.

The new website makes it easier to find our current and previous reports, allows key word searches to obtain types of audit findings and makes it easier to report waste, fraud and abuse. It offers full mobile compatibility for easy viewing via smart phone or tablet.

Recently the Office of Legislative Management gave us a tab on the front page of the Connecticut General Assembly's website to give the public quicker and more direct access to our office.

In addition to our technological achievements, our office has taken on a greater role in the state capital by working with the government, administration and elections and other committees on legislation that calls for greater transparency, accountability and savings.

Our last three annual reports resulted in five public acts that implemented over 20 of our recommendations and numerous reforms to improve state government. This year's recently released report has nine recommendations submitted for your consideration.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

In closing, although we have accomplished a great deal in a short period of time, I look forward to even more successes for our agency working hand in hand with the legislature as our partner in creating a better state government for the constituencies that we serve.

It is an honor to be here before you today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you very much for your presentation and we have had an opportunity to speak many times and as a former colleague of the Connecticut General Assembly serving in the Senate, we have known each other, we have served on several committees and I know you're incredibly competent and I received the reports that you and the Democratic auditor sent out to make sure that our agencies are in compliance with their mission and they're always very comprehensive and you're always quick to add updates if there's something that's left out.

So I'm very happy with the job that you guys have been doing and frankly, I don't, I have no questions at this point so I'll open it up to other committee members. Senator Duff.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and hello, Senator, how are you.

MR. KANE: Hello.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Good to see you again. This is --

MR. KANE: Good to see you.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- a vast change from three years ago when I remember we had a fool room and --

MR. KANE: Someday you'll find, Senator, once you're out of office nobody cares anymore. (Laughter)

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): We still care. But anyway, I just to echo the Chairman's comments, feel you have worked hard --

MR. KANE: Thank you.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- and done a good job and you've certainly kept in touch with us and with me personally. I appreciate that.

Can you just, why don't you share with the Committee just some of the things you have learned along the way that --

MR. KANE: Yeah.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- maybe on the other side of the grass I guess from --

MR. KANE: Yes.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): -- were you were in elective office.

MR. KANE: No, that's a great question, Senator, truly. I'll tell you what the -- when I earlier on said we are the eyes and ears inside state government for you, that's, I really mean that.

I wish I had the access when I was sitting in those chairs that you sit in then that I have now. I mean, we truly see everything that takes place in state government.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING
11:00 a.m.

We get all the loss reports from every state agency. We obviously handle all the whistleblower complaints. We do compliance audits. We do the state's financial records for the comptroller's office.

We do the statewide single audit for the federal govern so we see all those federal dollars that transfer through each state agency.

So and I say this to any legislator that I see in and around the building, if you need anything from our office, feel free to contact us at any time. We have access to everything and its pretty neat and I truly appreciate the view.

We have great staff. John and I, Geragosian, and I get along fantastically. Everything we do is truly in a bipartisan manner. We have to agree before it gets publicized, the reports that Chairman Vargas mentioned.

So it's really kind of neat and unlike you guys, I get to leave at five o'clock so I don't envy that part of the anymore either so.

SENATOR DUFF (25TH): Thank you, Rob. I appreciate that. I do believe we have two very good auditors who work for us in the state so thank you so much. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

MR. KANE: Thank you, Senator.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Senator Fasano [sic]. Senator Looney.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon, Mr. Auditor.

MR. KANE: Good afternoon.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): How are you?

MR. KANE: I'm well, thank you.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Good. Just a question for clarification. I think we were trying to get the auditors nominations back on the four year pattern so you're actually being nominated for a term that would end in July of 23, is that right?

MR. KANE: Yeah, so I filled Bob Wards --

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Right.

MR. KANE: -- remainder of his term which ended June 30, 2019. What I realize now is I probably should have come up in front of your committee in '19 rather than now because my term will be till June of 2023. So the next time we will know better and we will plan it more accordingly.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): So and also just in terms of your mentioning whistleblower complaints and I just, I would like to ask you do you think our process for protecting whistleblowers or making sure that people are not intimidated about coming forward or worried about consequences of that, do you think we have an adequate process to protect them and to both ferret out complaints that may be based upon malice rather than merit but at the same time, encourage meritorious complaints to come forward.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Yeah, you know, that's a great question, Senator. In fact, recently John and I were the subject of a FOI complaint from one of the newspapers in regard to the Connecticut Port Authority.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

As you know, a lot of what came out from the Connecticut Port Authority was driven by a whistleblower complaint and we believe and the Attorney General has argued on our behalf that the investigation, the whole process behind the complaint should be protected.

And we plan on going to that FOI hearing, I know it was rescheduled but certainly to defend that part of the statute that we want people to come forward, we want them to feel protected. We want them to be able to speak openly in any situation.

And that's a big part of it so I think the Attorney General has backed us upon that situation. 461D(d) is the statute but I think we will continue to feel that way, that truly we want people to come forward and feel that they can without any repercussion.

SENATOR LOONEY (11TH): Thank you. Thank you very much and congratulations on your nomination.

MR. KANE: Thank you, Senator. Appreciate your support.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Senator Looney. Yes, Representative Perillo.

REP. PERILLO (113TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I don't have any questions, we have worked together in the past but since both gentlemen are here, I just wanted to say it's just nice to see in this building where it doesn't always happen, folks on their side of the aisle who really work well together and who generate a quality product that is absent any political overtones.

And it's just, it's of great value to us and of great value to the public so I just wanted to say

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

thank you, especially to you, Rob, but also, John, since your here as well, thank you both.

MR. KANE: And I appreciate those words. Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thank you, Representative Perillo. Representative Yaccarino.

REP. YACCARINO (87TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair and thank you, Rob, for being here and, John, you do great work and I just wanted to really thank you for that.

It's a benefit to us and it's a lot of hard work. And I did want to echo Senator Looney. I think it's important we protect whistleblowers because we need them.

Unfortunately they're just people that have to, you know, relay the information and I think that's important. You want to protect them along with our Attorney General but thank you both for the work you do and we really appreciate it. Thank you.

MR. KANE: Thank you. Thank you, Representative.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Yes, Representative Davis.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thank you, Auditor Kane, for seeking nomination and getting the re-nomination and Auditor Geragosian, thank you very much for the work that both of you guys do.

I know I have worked with you in the past in trying to get legislation passed to address some of the issues that I brought up with the DSS commissioner regarding third party vendors and data that I believe should be the data of the state of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

Connecticut and accessed by the state of Connecticut.

Have you seen any improvements with that since your report came out a couple for years ago detailing the difficulties you were facing?

MR. KANE: Yeah, thank your that question, Representative. And I know that the DSS commissioner was here and answered that question for you and she is new to the job as well so I, afterwards I, you know, I just grabbed her for a minute and said look, we should get together and talk about this issue.

As you know, this is a situation and I believe you put forth legislation in regards to this topic that there was an outside third party vendor who was holding the data for the Department. And we wanted to do an analysis of that data to see if there were anomalies and to see, you know, the issues that are taking place.

I mentioned in my testimony how we are expanding IT analytics. I mean, it's a huge part of our job going forward so we really want to develop that area.

And we were thwarted by this third party vendor because A, they wanted to charge us for the data and we don't believe that the state should pay for its own data. B, we want it in a way that we can use it, you know. There was no agreement on who they were going to provide us that data because its huge data sets and we wanted to make sure that our people could analyze it.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

So no, there hasn't been a cooperation as of yet, an understanding that how can get there and that's why we put it forth in our annual report yet again as possibly legislation.

The GAE committee has been fantastic with us and putting forth a bill every year with our recommendations and, you know, knock on wood, I think I have passed more bills now than when I was in the Senate. (Laughter) But we really have passed a great deal of legislation.

So I will say to you that we look forward to this being proposed again, that this legislation moves forward and that we are able to work with the agency that commissioner said she was willing to have a conversation about that so I'll look forward to that but I would say as of right now, no but I do believe it's possible

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Thank you. And are you still facing the same issue, I think it was more of a hypothetical, I don't know if this ever happened and maybe you can confirm, of when a vendor is terminated, either for cause or because maybe they leave, they don't get renewed as the RP goes out and somebody else picks up the contract, that that data is now lost. Is that still something that the state of Connecticut is facing --

MR. KANE: That's --

REP. DAVIS (57TH): -- and that should be addressed either through contract or through statute?

MR. KANE: Yeah, great question. That's another concern of ours that, you know, if this contract were to be terminated for whatever reason, that data

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

may go with it. And we have to protect against that.

We typically are written into every state contract which is kind of neat which gives us that access that I mentioned to Senator Duff earlier.

But yeah, I would think that is another one of our concerns that two want to make sure that if the contract ends, we still are protected and the data is housed within the state of Connecticut.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Thank you and thank you both for all of your efforts --

MR. KANE: Thank you.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): -- and. Well, I can't vote on or nomination but I encourage --

MR. KANE: No, it's a joint resolution.

REP. DAVIS (57TH): Is it a joint one now? Okay, I thought it said Senate on here. So my apologies. I will be supporting you. (Laughter) Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And we have been joined by Representative DiMassa from West Haven was here with us today.

Any further questions or remarks by Committee members? If not, I'd just like to once again congratulate you on your re-nomination by --

MR. KANE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): -- the Senate and House Republican leadership. Senator Fasano and Representative Klarides in reappointing you and continue doing a good job.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

MR. KANE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): All right. That concludes but before I let you go, I have to ask you the question I ask all nominees.

And that is is there anything that you believe might prove embarrassing to the governor, to this Committee or to the legislature in general?

MR. KANE: No.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you very much.

MR. KANE: Thank you.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And that concludes the nominees for today. At this point we open it to the public. Is -- there are some people here from the public that would like to speak.

I see Representative Reyes from Waterbury. Representative Reyes, why don't you come forward and provide your testimony.

Before you sit down, would please raise your right hand? Do you promise to tell us the truth and nothing but the truth? Please be seated. Representative Reyes, the floor is yours.

REP. REYES (75TH): Thank you very much. The Executive Nomination Committee, thank you very much. Good afternoon, Senator Duff, Representative Vargas, Senator Fasano, Representative Perillo and the esteemed members of the Executive Noms.

I come here, I have provided written testimony. I come here in full support of Dr. Miguel Cardona, a person who I have known personally for over 20 years

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

and as the -- as the Governors selection for Education Commissioner.

I will unapologetically state that yes, we are both fellow Puerto Ricans and I support him beyond the fact that we are both Puerto Ricans. I believe that his enthusiastic and I, what I like to believe his youthful enthusiasm is the shot in the arm that we both need, that we all need here in the state of Connecticut.

And I think that we are at a crossroad. I think that some of the questioning that I heard here earlier and we need to expose further on is the regionalization conversation.

I think that representing a larger municipality, in this case Waterbury, I believe that that's a conversation that needs a deeper dive and one that I have challenged Dr. Cardona to actually dig into because I think it's important to the state of Connecticut.

Educational cautionary formula doesn't quite work well enough for the larger cities. That's, I'm going to put it as mildly as I can put it but I believe -- I represent Waterbury which is one of the majorly underfunded cities.

And I have had this conversation with Dr. Cardona so that's why I think it's an important conversation to have with the new commissioner. And he has been in Waterbury several times already and I would continue to develop that relationship because I think that he represents a mid-sized city.

But I think that the state of Connecticut is at a motor crossroad when it comes to the regionalization

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

and it's a conversation that's a hard one but I think that's one that's very necessary for this state to actually take on.

From an academic standpoint, Dr. Cardona comes highly recommended, highly accomplished, and as professional a man as I have met in the educational field. As I said earlier, I 100 percent endorse and back the new commissioner and hopefully that they will be awarded in favor with your nominating -- with your vote and at that point if you have any questions I'm willing to take them. Thank you, sir.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Well, thank you very much, Representative Reyes. You weren't in the room but Commissioner Cardona is here with us right now listening to your remarks.

Was -- I echoed some of the same congratulatory statements, not only because of his work the last few months as our Commissioner of Education but because it's a long line of many jobs well done and this is just the latest of a long list of achievements on his part.

So I'm happy you were here to provide testimony on his behalf. And at this point if any Committee members have any questions? If not, thank you for being here and thank you for expressing your support.

REP. REYES (75TH): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And I -- we also had congratulatory statements according to the clerk from Senator Daugherty Abrams and from Representative Abercrombie both in support of the nomination of Commissioner Cardona, the confirmation

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

of Commissioner Cardona for Commissioner of Education.

Any further written communication, Madame Clerk? If not, that concludes the public hearing portion of this meeting and we will proceed with the business portion of the meeting.

So if Madame Clerk will join us, we will take up the first nominee which is Miguel Cardona of Meriden to be Commissioner of Education.

Is there a motion to that effect? It's been moved. Is there a second? Second. It's been moved and properly seconded. Moved by Representative Godfrey and I believe seconded by Representative Phipps. Will the Madame Clerk please take the roll?

CLERK: Vargas - yes. Phipps - yes. Perillo - yes. Sorry, I didn't see you join us. Davis - yes? D'Agostino - yes. DiMassa - yes. Godfrey - yes? Verrengia. Yaccarino.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): The roll as customary will be kept open till 4 p.m. this afternoon.

And now we will move on to Deidre S. Gifford to be Commissioner of Social Services. Is there a motion to that effect?

It's been properly moved I believe by Representative Yaccarino and seconded by Representative Godfrey. Will Madame -- well, actually since we are all here, is there any variation from our previous motion?

Seeing no variation, will you please record us as voting yes on Commissioner Deidre Gifford of West Hartford's motion to be Commissioner of Social Services.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON
EXECUTIVE & LEGISLATIVE NOMINATIONS
PUBLIC HEARING

CLERK: Yes, sir, I recorded it.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): And the next one is a Senate Joint Resolution to confirm the appointment of Robert J. Kane of Watertown to be an Auditor of Public Accounts.

Do I have a motion? It's moved by Senator Fasano. Is there a second? Seconded by Senator Formica. Will the Madame Chair please take the roll?

CLERK: Duff - yes. Vargas - yes. Looney - yes. Phipps - yes. Fasano - yes. Perillo. (Laughter) Bergstein? Davis - yes. D'Agostino - yes. DiMassa - yes. Formica - yes. Godfrey - yes. Hartley. Kushner. Moore. Verrengia. Whitkos. Yaccarino - yes.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): We got a taste of humor from Shelton, Connecticut, the Naugatuck Valley. (Laughter)

Well, votes will keep -- be kept open till 4 p.m. Madame Clerk, when is our next meeting?

CLERK: The next meeting is -- next meeting and hearing is Thursday.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): Thursday, February 20. Very well.

CLERK: 11 o'clock.

REP. VARGAS (6TH): 11 o'clock right here room 1A. Thank you very much and with that, we are recessed till next Thursday.