



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly  
Education Committee  
Testimony of Acting Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker  
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Good morning Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee. I am Charlene Russell-Tucker, Acting Commissioner at the Connecticut Department of Education (Department), and I am pleased to have an opportunity to testify before you today regarding a series of important education-related proposals on your agenda.

**H.B. No. 6557, An Act Concerning Social And Emotional Learning**

**Section 1** – requires each local and regional board of education to administer a universal mental health and resiliency screening to all students for the purpose of identifying students in need of interventions and support. Because supporting student social-emotional learning is a priority for the Department, we are in the process of finalizing a contract to make available a free social-emotional learning assessment, ultimately to every school district. Through that contract, we will be rolling out phase one of the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), with select districts this school year. The DESSA is strength-based and research-based universal assessment that measures social-emotional development and behavior. The research has shown improvements in school climate, student achievement, and early identification for at-risk students. Additionally, there is a supplemental assessment to address more targeted supports. Both assessments will be available to all districts through a phased rollout.

**Section 2** – of this proposal mandates specific ratios for student support personnel for districts to maintain. The Department strongly supports the role of student support personnel in schools. However, mandating specific ratios ignores the need for districts’ flexibility to determine and acquire the specific expertise found in student support personnel according to the needs of their student population. District leadership must be able to maintain staffing that is responsive to the needs of their students and families. This may mean that they need lower ratios of certain student support expertise so as to allow for higher ratios for others. Student needs also differ according to grade band – elementary students’ needs are different than middle school students’ needs, which are different than high school students’ needs. With finite resources, districts must effectively staff according to being responsive to students and families, and a blanket statewide solution assumes that all schools require the same levels of support. Availability of certified student support staff in certain areas of the state may also be a barrier to meeting the proposed staff to student ratios. Finally, no funding has been included in the governor’s budget to support the additional grants mentioned in subsection C.

**Section 3** – establishes a multi-agency statewide social-emotional support program that provides support and assistance to local and regional boards of education for mental health, social-emotional, behavioral support, trauma support and special education programs and services. Section 21 of this act appropriates \$10 million to the Department of Education to carry out this program. Funding for this program is not included in the Governor’s Recommended Budget. The Department continues to engage stakeholders and convene state agencies and behavioral and mental health partners to support student social,

emotional, behavioral and mental health needs. The Commissioner of Education tri-chairs the Social-Emotional Learning and School Climate Collaborative which has augmented efforts in coordinating with a broad cross section of stakeholders including other state agencies as well as education -related and community organizations. Additionally, the Department is engaged in a number of state-level collaborations to ensure wraparound services and supports for students and families, including: the Connecticut Children’s Behavioral Health Plan Implementation Advisory Board;; the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council; a newly formed DCF initiative to address the CT Children’s Behavioral Health System; the Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap; the Commissioner’s Roundtable for Family Engagement; the Connecticut School Discipline Collaborative and more. The Department also continues to provide systems of support for districts to enhance their capacity to engage mental and behavioral health partners to assist in supporting student needs. Specifically, the Department is also currently engaged in planning with CT’s primary behavioral health providers, DCF and DSS to enhance the provision of school-based services. Districts also assess and determine student support services needs and use community providers as supplemental resources.

**Section 4** – requires each local and regional board of education to develop and implement a comprehensive school counseling program for the school district. The Department supports this proposed language, as it is in line with the October 2020 adopted State Board of Education’s Position Statement on the Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Framework.

**Section 5** – is already in progress. The Components of Social Emotional and Intellectual Habits for Grades 4-12 will be completed by June of this year.

**Sections 6 and 7** – adds social-emotional learning measures to the state accountability index and performance management and support plan. The Department is working with districts on many initiatives related to social-emotional learning, however, social-emotional learning measures need greater evidence of psychometric validity and reliability before they can be considered for inclusion in high state accountability systems. In fact, many experts caution against it. Please see: [Opinion | Don’t Grade Schools on Grit - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#).

**Section 9** – appears to significantly alter educator evaluations. It allows for academic growth measures to inform, but not form the basis for summative assessment. Removing multiple academic indicators without revisiting the overall approach to evaluations could create challenges with summative ratings, placing greater emphasis on the observation and performance portion of the guidelines.

The Department is committed to engaging partners to revisit the approach to educator evaluation and support. Such a significant shift as proposed in this bill is premature, as we are currently convening an advisory council of educational stakeholders (per [C.G.S. Section 10-151d](#)) to provide input in reimagining CT’s educator evaluation and support system in its entirety. Those invited include: CT Association of Boards of Education (CABE), CT Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), CT Association of Schools (CAS), CT Federation of School Administrators (CFSA), CT Association of School Administrators (CASA), CT Education Association (CEA), American Federation of Teachers-Connecticut (AFT-CT), the RESC Alliance, and the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force. Using this process to ensure input from all stakeholders will best allow the evaluation system to evolve in a meaningful manner.

**Please also see** the testimony below related to **H.B. No. 6556**, which proposes more immediate short-term changes to evaluations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, which will allow the above advisory council time to develop the proposed reimagined educator evaluation and support system and for it to be reviewed and implemented.

**Section 10** – requires the Department of Education and the teachers’ bargaining unit to create one or more student learning objectives that are focused on social-emotional learning and resiliency. Student learning objectives, even those tied to SEL, should not be determined by the Department nor the exclusive bargaining units for teachers. Student learning objectives should be created by individual educators, informed by data from their specific students. It should not be a one-size fits all approach.

**Section 12** – requires social-emotional learning and restorative practices training for school resource officers (SRO). The Department agrees with the need for such training for SROs and we recommend that mental health training also be included.

**Section 13** – requires that school counselors devote at least eighty percent of work time during regular school hours to providing school counseling services directly to individual or groups of students. As indicated previously, district leadership needs to be able to maintain staffing and staffing assignments that are responsive to the unique needs of their students and aligned with the human and financial resources available to the district. The role of school counselors should not be dictated uniformly. Districts must be able to assess their needs, which are impacted by daily occurrences, and have the autonomy to be responsive to their school community.

**Sections 14, 15 & 16** – pertain to social emotional learning and are identical to sections 11, 12 and 13 of SB 2. The first integrates social-emotional learning throughout the professional development series for certified staff. The second section requires each school district’s Professional Development and Evaluation Committee to include Social-Emotional Learning in the district professional development plan for certified employees of the district. Lastly section 16 requires the integration of Social-Emotional Learning in the local district’s education goals for the district. While we are supportive of social-emotional learning for school staff, without additional resources, this could prove to be a burden to local districts.

**Section 20** – refers to the development of model curricular units integrating strategies that promote social and emotional learning. The Department interprets this as a statewide model curriculum with a scope and sequence that includes units of study, concepts, skills, tasks, assessments, with identified evidence-based instructional strategies with aligned resources. The Department is already completing this work and would position the [Kindergarten through Grade 3 Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Habits Framework](#) that has already been completed as the first phase in providing a statewide model for ensuring all students have learning opportunities to develop skills, knowledge, and habits. We also anticipate that we will be completing the Grade 4-12 SEL Intellectual Habits Framework by the indicated dates in the bill and therefore will have a K-12 statewide model for implementing/delivering a model curriculum.

**H.B. No. 6556, An Act Addressing Issues Created By The Covid-19 Pandemic On Public Education In Connecticut**

**Section 1** - defines the term “learning loss.” We would suggest using the term “COVID recovery” as an alternative. This reframes this construct to acknowledge the incredible learning that *has* occurred this year, albeit in non-traditional circumstances, and removes the deficit mindset. The Department would further prefer to see “identified obstacles to a student’s education . . .” in the place of “extended gaps or discontinuities.”

The Department is pleased to see language included that supports the administration of our statewide summative assessments. We believe this is vitally important to determining student growth and COVID-recovery. In response to Section 1(c), the Department is currently designing a learning framework for education post-pandemic to address the points raised. The framework will include recommendations for diagnosing, planning, and monitoring learning using the Department’s evidence-based guides and strategies, coupled with summative and formative assessments and will be supported by digital curricula resources to address unfinished learning and engage learners K-12. The framework will provide recommendations for summer learning and extended day models.

The Department would suggest removing Lines 41-44, as we do not agree for the need to have a single definition of student engagement. We collect attendance data and have reported on that measure in categorical (e.g., chronic absenteeism) and continuous (e.g., attendance rates). We also collect and report discipline data, as well as on-track to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, etc. This year, we also know how students are attending (in-person or remote). If this definition is required and it goes beyond what we already collect, this could result in some brand-new burdens on districts. Lastly, we do not believe we need the yearly report outlined in (f). We would suggest having the Department produce 2 reports – one due Jan 2022 and another due Jan 2023. Beyond that, our annual reporting such as on the Condition of Education will take care of monitoring and reporting student achievement.

**Section 2** –prohibits the use of multiple indicators of student academic growth for educator evaluations for the school years of 2020-2021 (the current school year) and 2021-2022. Of note, the language requiring summative ratings use these indicators aside from those two years is unchanged in this bill, suggesting that these indicators are to used going forward which is in conflict with **H.B. No. 6557, An Act Concerning Social And Emotional Learning**.

In response to the disruption to education cause by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department has established [Flexibilities for Implementing the CT Guidelines for Educator Evaluations](#) for the current school year. The Department would propose the legislature continue the flexibilities permitted in the guidance instead of prohibiting the use of multiple indicators of student academic growth for this year and next school year. Additionally, the flexibilities allow the summative rating to be waived, while also reflecting the critical importance of social-emotional learning and maintaining the structure of meaningful support and feedback. For example, language might include at the end of Section 10-148a (a): “Notwithstanding any provision of the General Statutes to the contrary, for the school years commencing July 1, 2020, to July 1, 2022, local or regional boards of education may implement teacher evaluations consistent with the Connecticut State Department of Education guidance providing flexibilities related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which shall not be deemed to be regulations, as defined in section 4-166”.

**Sections 3 & 4** – pertain to summer learning programs for Alliance Districts. The Department currently provides Summer School Grant opportunities for Priority School Districts (PSDs) - a subset of identified Alliance Districts. Section 10-265m of the Connecticut General Statutes establishes grants for summer

school programs in PSDs. Funds are to be used for summer school for students in grades K-3 who are substantially deficient in reading in order to provide instruction that incorporates the competencies for early reading success and effective reading. Priority is given first to elementary and then to middle schools with the highest number of students who are substantially deficient in reading. Many, if not most Alliance Districts utilize their Alliance District grant funds to provide summer learning experiences. Under Connecticut General Statute Section 10-262u (d), additional learning time, either extended day or extended year is a focus area for spending Alliance District funds. Most summer school programming provides five weeks of programming, aligning with the IDEA extended school year (ESY) expectations. In addition, the Department understands that many districts are utilizing federal pandemic recovery funding to support this type of recovery work by way of summer school and summer programming.

The Department is supportive of expanded summer programming, particularly given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our students. However, additional resources would be necessary. In particular, the minimum hour requirement would require significant additional funding to support teaching staff, support staff, food services and custodial staff, and extension of transportation contracts.

**Section 5** – The Department supports the afterschool grant program and do not believe any additional funds should be diverted from direct programming.

**Section 6** – extends the removal of the Commissioner waiver for the processing of a substitute without a bachelor’s degree through the 2021-2022 Academic Year, which the Department has no real concern with. However, it also places additional limitations on the number of days a substitute without a bachelor’s degree can serve in the same assignment.

### **S.B. No. 977, An Act Concerning Virtual Learning**

The Department’s testimony related to [HB 6508, An Act Concerning Remote Learning Attendance](#) should be reviewed as it raises parallel concepts. For simplicity and consistency with implementation, we request any concepts that move forward in this bill and HB 6508 be combined in the same section. The Department recognizes there is momentum building and there may be a real need to consider how virtual or remote learning will be utilized during the next school year, however, requiring a comprehensive audit as outlined in this proposal cannot be done within available appropriations and would require additional staff.

The Department is supportive of ensuring there are universal implementing standards for virtual and remote learning. We would ask that it be clarified in this proposal that “the remote or virtual learning standards created by the Department shall not be deemed to be regulations, as defined in section 4-166.” Related to the other requirements in this bill, we would need further resources to conduct stakeholder engagement/focus groups, communicate to the field, implement the standards, provide training/PD and facilitate the procurement of statewide digital tools. While the Department is not opposed to taking on this additional work if given the necessary resources, we estimate that the project would take a minimum of two years.

### **S.B. No. 976, An Act Concerning Special Education**

The Department is fully in favor of section 1 of this proposal as it mirrors section 9 of our agency proposal. We oppose section 2 of the bill. There is no delineated purpose in the proposed statutory

language and the information that is required to be collected may be available through other sources or through other reports (i.e., PA 17-2 (June Special Session) [Special Education Cost Model Task Force, Final Report, July 11, 2019](#)), therefore, there could be redundancies. The findings and recommendations, which must be included in the final report are not clearly articulated in the purpose. Lastly, the date the task force has to submit the report of their findings and recommendations has already passed (January 1, 2020).