

# Education Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** SB-977

**Title:** AN ACT CONCERNING VIRTUAL LEARNING.

**Vote Date:** 3/29/2021

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute Change of Reference to Appropriations

**PH Date:** 3/8/2021

**File No.:**

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## **SPONSORS OF BILL:**

Education Committee

## **REASONS FOR BILL:**

Section 1: Defines “virtual learning” and requires SDE to adopt uniform standards and make them available online.

Section 2: Requires SDE to do a comprehensive audit of virtual learning offered during the pandemic.

Section 3-4: requires districts to provide professional development and in-service training in virtual learning.

Section 5-6: Amends the 180-day school year laws to include virtual learning as an actual school session that counts towards the requirement.

Section 7: Requires SBE to amend the definitions of “excused absence” and “unexcused absence” to address virtual learning.

## **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

### **Charlene Russell-Tucker, Acting Commissioner, State Department of Education:**

SDE requests that any concepts that move forward in this bill and HB 6508 be combined in the same section. Requiring a comprehensive audit as outlined in this proposal cannot be done within available appropriations and would require additional staff. SDE is supportive of ensuring there are universal implementing standards for virtual and remote learning but ask that it be clarified that “the remote or virtual learning standards created by the Department shall not be deemed to be regulations.” 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. They are not opposed to taking on this project and estimate that it would take two years minimum.

**Steven Hernández, Executive Director, CWCSEO:**

We are in favor of this bill, and recommend it specify equity as a consideration in developing standards. The pandemic has exacerbated disparities in educational opportunity in the state, particularly for our most vulnerable populations. Parents being completely disconnected with their children's educators. Much has been asked of parents and guardians during the pandemic, and those that were able took on the mantle of responsibility necessary to ensure that their children continued to learn.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

**Rep. Vincent Candelora, House Republican Office:**

Supports the bill, and would like it to require SDE to set uniform minimum requirements for distance learning that would set minimum standards for grading, require student participation and the same amount of teacher instruction time as classroom settings, require in-person education for special needs students if necessary, provide a periodic review of whether minimal standards are being met, allow towns to use the first three snow days as traditional snow days.

**Walter E. Auch Jr.:**

This legislation makes sense. Minimum standards should be established. He cannot imagine anyone could or would object and asks that this bill be passed.

**Michael R. Chris, First Selectman, Town of Harwinton:** The standards developed should include local educational officials to ensure the practical application of such standards can be properly implemented in our educational system. A one-size-fits all approach will not work, as each municipality and school district has its own set of needs and abilities. There should be no additional professional development requirements for teachers.

**Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, Inc.:**

**Mike Muszynski, SFRM, Connecticut Conference of Municipalities**

**Erika Wiczenski, First Selectwoman, Willington**

They support a review by SDE of the provision of virtual learning in our K-12 schools. We urge you to ensure that this review include identification of resources needed at the local level to effectively deliver instruction in the remote model, and to provide that this be a local option rather than a mandated delivery system.

**Andrew Feinstein, Chair, SEEK Legislative Committee:** They suggest this legislation be revised to deal with areas including compensatory education, summer services, addressing learning loss, public education of learning loss data, remote education post-COVID, digital connectivity, absent students, transition back to in-person school and computer privacy.

**Hamish MacPhail, Policy and Research Director, ConnCAN;**  
**Shannon Marimón, Executive Director, ReadyCT;**  
**Maria Morelli-Wolfe, Attorney, GHLA, Connecticut Legal Services and LAA;**  
**Daniel Pearson, State Director, Educators for Excellence-Connecticut;**  
**Ashley Zane, Government Affairs Associate, CT Business and Industry Association**

As Connecticut schools move back to an in-person setting, virtual learning will continue to play a periodic role in public education. By passing this bill, Connecticut students, families and teachers will have clarity on expectations and be more prepared to hit the ground running, rather than scramble in uncertainty.

**Rakshita Ramakrishna, Stamford High School Mayor's Youth Leadership Council:**

They ask that this bill be amended to include student privacy and data protections in the audit of virtual learning that SDE will conduct and among the uniform training standards for virtual learning that the State Board of Education and local boards of education should require. It's consistent with the recommendations of the Connecticut Student Privacy Task Force and it's consistent with best practices of student engagement and school governance.

**Jennifer Ripley:**

Proposes adding a statewide virtual school, which would allow for all distance learning children in our state to have a fair and equal education. All students enrolled in it would have access to a high-quality virtual education that is set to state standards and optimized to be taught to them via the internet. This would ensure that a child in Hartford or Bridgeport is receiving the same quality virtual education as a child in Greenwich or Glastonbury.

**Mary Yordon, Divisional Vice President, AFT Connecticut:**

They support setting standards for virtual learning, with a review of technology, curriculum, training, and consideration of the efficacy of virtual and hybrid learning, and metrics for accountability and equity leading to standards for virtual learning. However, virtual learning must also be considered, given impacts such as the development of healthy social interaction skills, impacts on mental health, and impacts to privacy rights of students. Virtual learning has been disastrous for marginalized communities and the equity review mentioned in legislation is essential.

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

**Teachers: Denise Barrett; Elsa Batista; Ashley Brooksbank; Leigh Connole; Cathy Lee; Andrew Cucinella; Martin Kellogg; Mary Ellen Foley; Jacob Fricker, Heather Gage; Cathy Hackett; Randall Light; Amanda Lynch; Kevin Mack; Megan Osimanti; Erin Pinsky; Andrea Rowland; Angela Staron**

Connecticut educators expressed the challenges that both students and educators have faced with the virtual learning approach. Educators explain the importance of in-person learning and how imperative it is for students to be able to interact with their teachers and fellow students. Concerns regarding technical issues, lack of overall online participation, and more training needed for educators to be able to adapt to the online environment were discussed as well.

**Jennifer Canepari; Kimberly Kiernan**

Remote learning has not been successful for education or the social and mental well-being for our students. Human beings are social beings. We all need and want to be accepted, challenged and social with our peers, friends and family. At the high school level, teachers do not want students to have their video cameras on. If in person learning is best, why can't the students see each other during class? If the issue is the teacher's union, then we need to act now to find new teachers who are willing to teach!

**Emilia Caturano, Teacher; Heather O'Brien; Daniel Rivers, Teacher**

We are doing a disservice to all our students by setting the precedent that education is optional. They will continue thinking that they do not need to speak to their classmates because they can only learn independently. Teachers have never seen the face of some remote students. Rather than thrust the burdens of remote learning on the local districts and require classroom teachers to concurrently teach in-person and remote students, the state should devise a regional approach to virtual learning using our local RESCs.

**Kristen Festa; Chris Minutolo**

We need to be moving away from virtual learning as much as possible. Special-needs parents overwhelmingly feel their children were being left behind and regressing. Provisions of our children's IEPs have been violated routinely. In-person instruction needs to be the standard for special needs children and districts need to be accountable. Screen time is harmful to all children and we should not be encouraging more of it. The isolation of virtual learning is a tremendous mental health issue.

**Gary Gile:** Bills like this are slowly destroying our youth. Focus on getting kids back in school full-time without masks and social distancing, and if teachers are afraid to be in the same classrooms with the students, they can wear masks. Follow the science and not the CDC and WHO which have personal motives for keeping this mask wearing and social distancing in force. We must stop scaring our youth and adults with this "pandemic" which, if true numbers were being tracked, would not be any more deadly than the flu and I do not ever recall shutting down society because of the yearly flu.

**Jennifer Jacobsen:**

What is so interesting about this proposal is the lack of any analysis or evaluation of effectiveness, or other impacts of this modality upon students, educators, districts, or families thus far prior to SBE standards and codification in this bill. One would think that prior to codifying something such as this there would first be a comprehensive analysis of its merit. While the audit of virtual learning is an important one to undertake, that is all that should be in this bill until such time as that audit has determined full scope of impact and effectiveness.

**Anne Manusky, President, Connecticut Republican Assembly:**

There is concern that some children are not developmentally ready to be placed in front of a computer screen for academic learning even under 15 years of age, and that a child's vision development typically does not reach a certain visual motor development until sometime between the ages of 8 to 10 years. COVID is just about over, we would be wise to not go through doing audits or a work group or study group on virtual learning programs at this time.

**Marilyn Mathes, Connecticut Education Association:** They have witnessed many technical problems and distractions that have impacted instruction for their daughter, her teacher and many other students, all of which took time away from instruction. I have also seen the toll this year has taken on my daughter's and other students' emotional and mental health, and the stress from remote learning challenges has added to this serious problem.

**Reported by: Dallas Emerle**

**Date: 3/31/2021**