



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Testimony of Acting Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker March 17, 2021

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.

### **HB 6616, An Act Concerning The Process For Funding A New Charter School**

The Department has been working with the Office of Policy and Management over the last year to create a process which does not put the State Board of Education in the position of approving a new and/or expanded school without a commitment of funding over the coming years as it grows to full enrollment. In the past, this has created a false sense of expectation by the school and potential families. If the Legislature chooses to create this new non-lapsing account, as drafted, we do not believe this bill ensures the legislative funding commitment to the charter school going forward beyond the first fiscal year, which is problematic.

### **HB 6618, An Act Concerning Certain Funding Issues Affecting Boards Of Education**

**Section 1** – would allow Alliance Districts to reserve up to 10% of their increase in Alliance funds for items not included in their Alliance District plan. Since approval and adoption in 2012, the specified legislative intent of the Alliance District program has been to "enable a partnership" between the state and identified underperforming districts having the greatest need, with additional support and investment to drive "bold and innovative" reform strategies for improvement. Annual Alliance District plans are meant to specifically enable the policy to advance this charge. Districts currently have broad latitude to formulate and propose improvement plans that cover Talent, Academic, Climate, and Operations domains. Allowing districts to utilize any part of their Alliance District allocations for items "not included in their Alliance District plans" 1) goes against the intent of the Alliance District program; and 2) would dilute funding meant for those purposes. This shift has the potential to supplant local operating budgets with state funds and is not in alignment with the statute. The Department works very closely with Alliance Districts to allow flexibility when circumstances arise. Changes can be made and authorized in a timely way dependent on district need.

**Section 2** – seeks to allow districts to carry forward unspent federal COVID relief funds into the following fiscal year. Timelines for expending federal funds are determined by federal statute. Even if passed, this language would not change the requirements of the guiding federal statute. Districts currently have two CARES programs through COVID-19 relief funds which extend into school years 2021-2022 and 2022-2023. Additionally, the newly passed American Rescue Plan will provide further funding for districts over the next two years.

**Section 3** – would allow regional boards of education to put unexpended funds equaling up to 2% of their annual district budget into a reserve fund. Regional boards of education can currently put up to 1% in the reserve fund. This change would align regional boards of education with local boards of education, which have a 2% threshold already. The Department is supportive of this change.

## **HB No 6619, An Act Concerning The Development Of A Kindergarten To Eight Grade Model Curriculum**

We are in support of the goals of this bill and believe that a K-8 model curriculum is the standard that we should be working toward. However, the Department cannot support this proposal as written given the proposed timelines, current staff capacity, budget constraints, and other concerns indicated below.

**Section 1** – requires the Department, in collaboration with the State Education Resource Center (SERC), to establish a model K-8 curriculum by January 1, 2023. That timeline is not reasonable. As we have learned from the African American/Black and Puerto Rican/Latino curriculum writing experience, it takes more than 1.5 years to meaningfully accomplish the work for a single grade-level course, and this legislation requires multiple grades, subjects, and topics. The Department and SERC continue to work on finalizing the African American/Black and Puerto Rican/Latino mandated high school elective course of studies curriculum. This has taken more than one hundred hours to draft and revise. Department personnel continue to provide a minimum of least 10 hours a week to review each unit for alignment and consistency in lesson and assessment design. We would ask that you take these timing issues into consideration.

**Section 2** – requires the Department, in consultation with SERC, to produce a report describing the model curriculum, which includes the scope and sequence and course objective, and a report on the development and review of the curriculum by January 15, 2023. Given the concerns outlined above, this deadline is not achievable.

For example, the Department is developing renewed Grade 6-8 model math curricula with aligned instructional resources and strategies for use by all districts, schools and learners. Additionally, the Department is designing K-3 model early literacy curricula and K-5 model social studies curricula. To shorten the timeline from three years to be finalized as prescribed here, along with the subject matter prescribed in this bill, the Department would require a dedicated budget and several new staffing positions to effectuate the plan.

## **HB No 6620, An Act Concerning The Right To Read And Addressing Opportunity Gaps And Equity In Public Schools**

The Department would first like to thank the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, and Senator Miller in particular, for their steadfast commitment to our shared goals of promoting literacy and closing opportunity gaps within our state. We completely support in concept the creation of a Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success (Center), while acknowledging that funding is not currently available for this initiative. However, we would ask and strongly recommend that the Center be housed within the Department. It is critical that the Department provides leadership in setting the commitment for effective literacy instruction for all Connecticut students. Additionally, the Department works closely with districts to support continuous improvement, strategic planning and effective resource allocation; therefore, we welcome the opportunity to add this research arm to the Academic Office to continue supporting schools and districts in prioritizing literacy initiatives, allocating resources and time to increasing literacy instruction, creating district and school structures (e.g., literacy leadership, literacy teams, professional learning, coaching supports), implementing intensive reading interventions, and providing strong family engagement. Finally, since 2013, the Department has worked in partnership with the University of Connecticut (UConn), Literacy How, and Hill for Literacy to design the Connecticut Literacy Model and required professional learning to develop the capacity of teachers in the Science of Reading. We are well positioned to commit to a centralized

Center at the Department, with appropriate funding support. We believe the timeline for the creation of the Center will need to be extended if it is to be met.

If the Center is established within the Department, we will take on the responsibility of choosing the assessments and programs for districts to review and choose from. Currently, our Academic Office is designing a statewide survey to collect data to identify which literacy programs are currently in place and in use at the district level. The Academic Office Reading and Literacy Director and K-12 English Language Arts Education Consultant will conduct the survey late March to April 2021. The survey and analysis will be complete by June 2021. The Department will also prioritize a list of literacy programs and evaluate each to determine alignment to standards and the science of reading.

We would also recommend that “achievement” remain within the Bill, to maintain a focus on the outputs of student performance, and “opportunity” be inserted to provide a renewed focus on the inputs to support student performance. These are two distinct phenomena that have equal place in education, and this should be clear it is referring to both terms of art.

Lastly, the Department supports the partnership with SERC in implementation of the African American/Black and Puerto Rican/Latino Studies Course and Curriculum; however, it will require funding to support this partnership and work with districts on implementation.

Again, we fully support and are passionate about this work and hope you will consider adequately funding it and housing it within the Department to ensure alignment and coordination in delivering technical assistance and supports as well as advancing the sharing of best practices amongst our districts. The Academic Office, specifically the Turnaround Office, has already created a model for providing the necessary supports and consultancy for continuous improvement to ensure all students have access to targeted supports and resources.

**HB No 6621, An Act Concerning Assorted Revisions And Additions To The Education Statutes**  
The Department generally supports this proposal; however, we have comments for further clarification.

The purpose of the amended language in **Section 2** is to allow the vision screening required by the statute to be performed by use of an automated vision screening device. The existing statute required the automated vision screening device to be equivalent to a Snellen chart; this effectively precluded the use of an automated vision screening device because such a device is not equivalent to a Snellen Chart. The statute as amended allows a school district, if it so chooses, to use an automated vision screening device and to obtain the benefits which result from the use of such a device. Our suggested modification to the language below allows for the use of an equivalent vision test or chart in addition to the Snellen Chart as well as the use of an automated vision screening device. There are other vision tests/charts that are appropriate to be used for children not developmentally able to respond to the Snellen Chart. We also recommend that the statute include a definition of “an automated vision screening device” to provide assurances as to the validity of the device being used.

OUR RECOMMENDATION:

**Sec. 10-214. Vision, audiometric and postural screenings: When required; notification of parents re defects; record of results.** (a) Each local or regional board of education shall provide annually to each pupil in kindergarten and grades one and three to five, inclusive, a vision screening[.]. Such vision screening may be performed using a Snellen chart, [or] an equivalent screening device, [such as]

or an automated vision screening device. The superintendent of schools shall give written notice to the parent or guardian of each pupil (1) who is found to have any defect of vision or disease of the eyes, with a brief statement describing such defect or disease and a recommendation for the pupil to be examined by an optometrist licensed under chapter 380 or an ophthalmologist licensed under chapter 370, and (2) who did not receive such vision screening, with a brief statement explaining why such pupil did not receive such vision screening.

**Section 3** – creates a CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program within the CT Department of Agriculture to award local grants for the purpose of helping Connecticut schools, licensed early childcare providers, and other organizations develop farm-to-school programs. The Department looks forward to working with the CT Department of Agriculture as a member of the advisory committee.

### **SB 1033, An Act Concerning The Inclusion Of Computer Science And Financial Literacy As Part Of The High School Graduation Requirements**

However well intentioned, the Department cannot support the modification of the High School Graduation Requirements to add additional coursework at this time. The current high school graduation requirements for students graduating in 2023 and beyond were passed several years ago after extensive work by a legislatively created task force. The implementation of those new conditions for graduation have subsequently been phased in over several years due to the complexity of rolling them out as a matter of practice within our districts.

Having said that, in addition to navigating the disruption to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, local and regional boards of education have been working over the past few years to align their policies, curricula, instruction, and student pathways in compliance with the 2023 graduation requirements. Mandating financial literacy and computer science for the class of 2023 as these students enter their junior year places an unnecessary burden on students, districts, and boards of education and is redundant with the existing requirements, as described in more detail below. The intent of the most recent modification of the high school graduation legislation was to support a student's individual learning needs and goals for high school and beyond. Adding to the existing mandated courses decreases student choice by reducing the number of opportunities for students to access elective courses specific to their interests, passions, or career pathway.

The current graduation requirements are intentionally flexible and the decision of which learning opportunities or courses are eligible to be part of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) or Humanity pathways is a local one. It is not necessary to single-out computer science as being part of STEM pathway as it is currently considered a part of the STEM pathway. Additionally, 33 Connecticut districts currently list personal finance as a local BOE graduation requirement. Currently, 14 districts are considering adding this course as a requirement by or before 2025.

### **SB 1034, An Act Concerning Minority Teacher Recruitment And Retention**

The Department is thankful for the Education Committee's steadfast commitment to supporting the Department in our work to increase the recruitment, and retention, of teachers of color. In 2016, the State Board of Education (SBE) adopted a Five-Year Comprehensive Plan: Ensuring Equity and Excellence for All Connecticut Students, initiating the development of strategies to increase the number of educators of color from 8.3% to 10% by 2021 (1,000 certified educators of color within 5 years). We are currently at 9.6% and moving steadily toward the SBE's goal. The Department is

generally supportive of this proposal aimed at continuing that progress; however, the following comments are provided for your consideration.

The Department supports the added definition for “residency program” in **Section 1**; however, we would recommend this avenue be available to all SBE approved certification programs (both alternate route and traditional routes) that utilize the Resident Educator Permit in accordance with C.G.S. Section 10-145m. This would include all approved certification programs and would better align with the Department’s proposed legislation also in Section 10-145m, which widens access to the Resident Educator Permit for both candidates and programs. Section 1 should also be clear that while a board may hire a Resident, this language is not intended to change any employment or certification-related requirements for a position in which the Resident is hired.

The Department is already making strides toward accomplishing this requirement outlined in **Section 3** through Educators Rising and TEACH Connecticut. The Department recommends a funding allocation be tied to Section 3 to support ongoing efforts with these two programs, which are both grant funded.

Lastly, the Department supports the creation of the video training model outlined in **Sections 4 & 6**.

### **SB 1035, An Act Concerning The Development Of A New Preservice Performance Assessment For Teacher Preparation Programs**

The Department is in opposition to this proposal for the reasons outlined by section below. Having said that, we would like to note that we are eager to work with the Chairs and members of the Committee to address some of the concerns we have heard with regard to edTPA.

**Section 1** – requires the Department to discontinue the statewide implementation of edTPA. edTPA, a pre-service performance-based portfolio assessment aligned to state and national content-specific teaching standards, requires candidates to demonstrate their pedagogical knowledge and skills in the areas of planning, instruction, and student assessment during student teaching. edTPA helps create equitable access to learner ready teachers for all Connecticut students, regardless of which EPP program candidates attend. It fulfills the expectations of Connecticut Special Act 12-3 and Public Act 15-243, and is an integral component of the Educator Preparation Program (EPP) approval process, which involves accreditation by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). It also plays a role in the SBE oversight of EPP programs. Furthermore, the implementation of the Education Preparation Advisory Council’s (EPAC) recommendations, including the adoption of edTPA, align to the vision that all teachers are learner-ready on day one of entering the classroom as a result of high-quality preparation that provides a solid foundation in the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching and ensures demonstration of deep content knowledge and content pedagogy.

**Section 2** – requires the Commissioner of Education, the president of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities and the Dean of the Neag School of Education at The University of Connecticut to jointly develop a preservice performance assessment to be implemented in teacher preparation no later than January 1, 2023, and **Section 3**, requires EPPs to administer it. It is unreasonable to assume that a Connecticut designed preservice performance assessment, as outlined Section 2, can be designed, implemented and adopted by Connecticut EPPs by July 1, 2023. The Department, in partnership with Connecticut EPPs, has invested a significant amount of time and resources to ensure the successful implementation of edTPA. Since 2016, edTPA has been piloted by several EPPs during two school

years: 2016-17 and 2017-18. At the conclusion of the pilot phase of edTPA implementation in Connecticut, a formal evaluation was conducted by a third-party research firm, RTI International. Findings of the evaluation were made available to the public. Additionally, the Department's Talent Office has conducted monthly conference calls with Connecticut EPP edTPA coordinators, who serve as liaisons between their EPPs and the Department, providing a forum for Connecticut EPP edTPA coordinators to receive edTPA-related updates; ask questions and receive clarification; problem solve collaboratively around implementation challenges and successes; and share best practices. Leading up to full implementation of edTPA in fall 2019, Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning & Equity (SCALE) and/or Pearson have collaborated with the CSDE to provide 22 professional development opportunities designed to support the adoption and implementation of edTPA in Connecticut for EPP faculty and other constituency groups. We would again like to note that we are eager to work with the Chairs and members of the Committee to address some of the concerns we have heard with regard to edTPA.

### **SB 1036, An Act Concerning Regional Cooperation Among School Districts**

The bill would allow districts to designate an elementary, middle, or high school in another district for their students to attend if they do not have one, which is an expansion of the current permission of this type for high school only. Essentially, this would allow a district to outpace all of their students without going through the regionalization process. The Department is committed to assisting districts with opportunities to regionalize and share services, but we believe this language is too permissive. Furthermore, it would allow districts to have their students attend elementary, middle and high school in multiple towns without a coherent strategy to determine what is best for the students, both academically and socially. The Department cannot support the proposal as written, but we are very willing to continue encouraging the use of shared services, and continue to highlight district best practices.