



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Public Hearing Testimony of Commissioner Charlene M. Russell-Tucker March 1, 2023

Good morning Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee. I am Charlene Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Education (department). I am pleased to have an opportunity to provide you with testimony today regarding several bills which appear on your agenda.

SB 1093, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of The Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee Concerning Education

Sections 1 & 2 - The department has developed a tiering system based on districts' overall use and disproportionate application of exclusionary discipline, and it currently works collaboratively with districts to develop systems to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, implement restorative alternatives and lead communities of practice to improve outcomes. The department is not opposed to receiving such response and improvement plan. Rather than require each plan, and plan update, to be sent to the Education Committee, we recommend that the department develop a webpage to make public the corrective plans. This process provides transparency as well as easy access to sharing plans and best practices among districts. While the department appreciates the language providing for four (4) additional staff to effectively implement this new requirement, additional resources are needed to hire the added staff and those added positions are not accounted for in the Governor's biennial budget.

Section 3 - The department agrees that creating a plan to potentially cap class size has the potential to address a number of educational challenges, as well as scale a number of educational innovations. Please note, however, that even with a phased-in implementation, such changes will require additional resources, both human and financial, on the part of districts, specifically access to an increased pool of certified teaching staff. There is a body of published research that presents data from various studies that the greatest impact of small class size is mostly found in the primary grades of K-3. There is a positive impact on student achievement; however, it can vary across literacy, mathematics, and science content. The same research indicates that a consequence to creating smaller class sizes, schools and districts were challenged in recruiting certified teachers, and new positions were too often filled by teachers without certification or minimal teaching experience. Therefore, as we recognize the positive impact, we must also be vigilant to ensure there are no unintended consequences.

Section 4 – Although class size for Pre-K is consistent with National Association for the Education of Young Children guidance, the department would like to highlight the importance of classroom space and its impact on class size as well as the need to ensure appropriate adult to student ratios to maximize learning for our Pre-K students.

Section 5 - The department is fully aware of the increased potential for youth suicide and continues to work with districts through many initiatives to support the mental health and emotional well-being of students. We will continue to provide resources to districts to address student mental health and suicide prevention and risk assessment efforts.

Section 6 - Subsection (2) asks that personally identifiable student information (i.e., how many credits the student earned) be sent to the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee (JJPOC). It is not clear under federal and state student data privacy laws that school districts can release this confidential data to the JJPOC. As an alternative, the department suggests that the JJPOC request a summary statistic be provided instead (e.g., average number of credits earned). Note that even with aggregate data, given the small number of students involved, the reporting of such aggregate data is likely to require data suppression to prevent potential re-identification of students.

Section 7 - The department supports the creation of an advisory committee concerning suspensions and expulsions of students in grades PreK to Grade 2 and serves as part of the JJPOC working group that developed this recommendation. The department has made significant strides in reducing exclusionary discipline in this population of students. Since 2016, no expulsions have been reported and in-school suspensions have declined by over 45 percent while out-of-school suspensions declined by over 72 percent in this grade band. The department created the Connecticut School Discipline Collaborative whose members reflect a diverse range of expertise in the fields of education, public policy, law, youth development, community leadership and parents to advise the department on issues, policies, and practices relating to school discipline. We respectfully request that the language reflect the engagement of the Collaborative in place of the JJPOC Education Subcommittee to complete this work to relieve the need for the department to convene yet another committee given the more than 50 legislatively required committees/taskforce, etc. that currently require the department's involvement. The purpose of the proposed new advisory committee aligns with the School Discipline Collaborative.

SB 1094, An Act Concerning the Implementation of Reading Models or Programs

We are in complete support for this proposal which amends the language from previously passed legislation allowing local and regional boards of education additional time to implement an approved core reading curriculum model or program in grades K-3 effectively and fully. Local and regional boards of education will have time to pilot programs, rolling-out approved core reading curriculum models or programs by grade level, provide professional learning on scientifically based literacy instruction, and braid funding sources to support the purchase of evidence-based, scientifically based literacy materials (e.g., Titles, ARP-ESSER, Alliance District Grants). We would like to note that the department respectfully requests that the timeline for implementation for local and regional boards of education granted a waiver be changed to "not later than July 1, 2024". The department would like to acknowledge and publicly thank the Committee Chairs, the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, Majority Leader Rojas and Sen. Miller for their steadfast commitment to our shared goals of closing the achievement and opportunity gaps within our state and ensuring all Connecticut students are reading by grade three.

SB 1095, An Act Concerning School Resource Officers

While the department supports the transparency in posting the memoranda of understanding and the additional specificity around the added procedures for the restraint of students, use of firearms and school-based arrests, we are unable to support the utilization of other staff, especially mental health (school counselors, social workers and psychologists) being reassigned from their critical roles to those duties typically assigned to school resource officers, no matter how brief the reassignment. Especially given the shortage of qualified mental health staff, schools need to utilize these staff members in ways

that are consistent with their expertise and experience to ensure students' emotional well-being and mental health are supported.

SB 1096, An Act Concerning the Charter School Approval Process

The department has been working with the Office of Policy and Management over the last few years 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 the school 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. As drafted, lapsing funds in the existing Charter Account may be insufficient to support new charters as they come on line and sustain operations over the long term. Additionally, this proposal eliminates the role of the Governor in the budget decision process. As written, this proposal allows the Department to commit the state to a new, long-term funding requirement without following the normal budget process. With that said, the department stands ready to continue the dialogue pertaining to charter school funding as the session progresses.

SB 1097, An Act Concerning School Nurses

The department is in support of increasing the entry level requirement for school nurses to a Bachelor of Science in Nursing or a related field beginning July 1, 2024, as well as grandfathering-in any school nurse who was so qualified and appointed prior to July 1, 2024. The level of preparation in a Bachelor of Science program (verses and Associates Degree) includes community health nursing clinical competencies which are vital for the increasingly complex medical and health care needs of Connecticut's diverse student population. We also support the increase in professional development requirements from 10 hours every two years to 15 hours every two years commencing July 1, 2024, in order for school nurses to remain current with evolving health and educational standards. The Department would like to have time to explore the process and impact regarding the creation of a special services endorsement for school nurses before making changes to the existing regulations.

SB 1098, An Act Concerning Public Education in The State

The department recognizes that this is a placeholder bill, however, should the proposal move forward with any requirements for the department to conduct a study, we would require additional resources.

HB 6757, An Act Concerning Teacher Performance Evaluations

The department's agency bill SB 1028 includes a proposal for modifying teacher performance evaluations that was approved through our State Board of Education; however, we continue to lead and participate in ongoing conversations with the Educator Evaluation and Support (EES) Council which has been meeting for the past 18 months since April 2021 to reimagine Teacher Evaluation in the State of Connecticut with an assortment of key educational stakeholders. The Council will continue to meet to reach consensus on the appropriate path forward for teacher performance evaluations and we look forward to continuing the conversation as the session progresses.

HB 6758, An Act Concerning Staffing for Certain Roles at The Department of Education

The department is appreciative of the additional positions outlined in this proposal to address two key areas of work - special education as well as curriculum development. Note however, that these positions are not reflected in the Governor's biennial budget.

HB 6760, An Act Concerning Civics Education and Media Literacy

It is the department's understanding that the bill as written is still a work in progress, and we are happy to engage in a dialogue with legislators to find a different mechanism by which to promote civic engagement for learners throughout our state. As written, we are not able to support this particular proposal given the expansive effort by the department in this area. The department's design team for K-8 Social Studies Model Curricula has partnered with CT Public Affairs to revise the existing State Board of Education (SBE) approved Social Studies frameworks to be adopted as Social Studies Standards which will articulate expected student outcomes. These new standards include civics and the intersection of media literacy, specifically how to develop student knowledge of determining media accuracy, use and their role in taking informed action. The department has analyzed civics extensively with civics professors, the Old State House and the Secretary of State's Office, secondary school civics teachers, and elementary school teachers to create meaningful social studies standards for all grades. Our goal for these standards has been to develop a set of comprehensive standards to design future curricula and learning experiences to promote student-centered and engaged learning. As a next step, the new Social Studies Standards will be presented to the SBE for adoption. Once adopted, K-8 model social studies curricula will be developed and published for district use. We believe that having a Civics Education and Media Literacy Task Force after all of this work has been done, would not be productive and will be step backward versus keeping the forward momentum. With that said, it is again the understanding of the department that this bill is a work in progress, and we would be pleased to be a part of the conversation.

HB 6762, An Act Concerning Schools

The department recognizes that this is a placeholder bill, however, should the proposal move forward with any requirements for the department to conduct a study, we would require additional resources.

HB 6763 An Act Concerning an Audit of The Statewide Mastery Examination

The Statewide Mastery Examinations in English language arts, mathematics, and science, that are required pursuant to federal and state law take, on average, a total of approximately 6-8 hours for a single student. This is out of the minimum 900 instructional hours required to be offered to students in the entire school year. Far more time for assessment is consumed by locally determined and administered assessments that are not mandated in law, often yield redundant information, and are not designed to support teachers with instruction. Therefore, while the department welcomes the opportunity to audit the time and resources spent on assessment, it does not believe that simply focusing on the statewide mastery examination will help achieve the desired goal of streamlining assessment practices and therefore is unable to support this proposal. Any audit or review should take a comprehensive look at **all** assessments administered at the district level to identify redundancies and minimize time spent on "assessment *of* learning" while maximizing "assessment *for* learning"; the former is a summative post-mortem while the latter is more about assessment and assessment practices

that are embedded within the teaching and learning process to help teachers meet the needs of all students.

A single assessment cannot serve too many purposes. Therefore, a more comprehensive look at all assessments will help ensure that the menu of assessments are aligned appropriately to their intended purposes. The State of Nevada which initially mandated a similar audit of the state assessment passed new legislation that authorized their State Department of Education to take a more comprehensive look at all assessments – state and local.