



STATE OF CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Public Hearing Testimony of Commissioner Charlene M. Russell-Tucker March 8, 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.

S.B. 1 An Act Concerning Transparency in Education

Sections 1 – 3 - The department already collects expenditure data at the district and school level in a uniform chart of accounts that is aligned to revenue source annually through its Education Financial System (EFS). This data meets state and federal reporting requirements and is publicly available in EdSight. Please note, the department, in collaboration with school districts, struggled for several years to implement a uniform chart of accounts at the local level that would not create a significant personnel and financial burden for school districts to convert to without success. It is important to note that across our 211 school districts there are multiple financial management systems used and varying levels of sophistication based on the size of the district and local fiscal staffing capacity. Our resolution to this problem was to create a crosswalk from the local school district financial system to a common chart of accounts that meets state and federal reporting requirements. It allows an apples-to-apples comparison of expenditures across districts and schools, thereby allowing full public fiscal transparency and understanding. Districts file this data by September 1st annually and then finalize the information by December 31st based upon an annual independent audit of their filing. The department files this data annually with the National Center for Education Statistics in a format that allows state-by-state comparisons and analysis of education expenditures. This data is publicly available at a district and school building level on the department's data portal EdSight. If passed, this legislation would create an unfunded mandate for both the department and for school districts as new financial systems would need to be developed and local methods of budgeting modified.

Sections 4 – 6 –Research shows that comprehensive sex education reduces teen pregnancies and births as well as reducing sexually transmitted diseases. Additionally, the most recent data from the Connecticut Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2019), indicated that the percentage of students who experienced sexual dating violence (i.e., being forced by someone they were dating or going out with to do things such as kissing, touching, or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to) increased from 10.0 in 2017 to close to 12% in 2019. That percentage is over 17% for females. We support the new language of provision of sex education that is age and developmentally appropriate and the inclusion of affirmative consent in such instruction, with the recommendation that parents would have the opportunity to opt their child out of this instruction if they so choose, as is the case under current law, specifically C.G.S. Section 10-16e.

Sections 7 & 8 – Given the important role of local and regional boards of education in our education system, the department is supportive of the concept of training for newly elected members of local and regional boards of education; however, we do not have the capacity to perform that service to boards of

education statewide. We would ask that this legislation be amended to allow the department to do this work in consultation with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education. This work would also require additional resources.

Section 9 – We are supportive of the removal of this language. The state no longer uses District Reference Groups. Additionally, the language being removed is a hindrance to the institutions and educators trying to complete field experiences.

Section 10 - The language would allow the Commissioner to annually designate new Alliance Districts, but it is not clear what that designation would be based upon or why it would be necessary. The language also removes the 5-year designation period meaning that districts would never exit the program. The Alliance District program provides funding to support district strategies to increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps by pursuing bold and innovative reforms. The goal of this intervention is to achieve success in these academic areas, thereby resulting in districts being able to exit the program. With no exit strategy, the department would see an increased burden annually of having more districts to support without more resources. This would dilute our capacity to help the districts with the greatest need. The language also creates another look back period for determining how much Alliance District funding a district would receive. We would now have 3 different mechanisms for determining a district's grant amount. The department welcomes the opportunity, as the session continues, for ongoing discussions of aligning the agency bill proposal SB 1028, which also includes modifications to the Alliance District statutes, with this proposal.

Finally, this language would mandate these funds be used for the creation of a Family Resource Center (FRC) in each elementary school in an Alliance District. The department strongly supports the work of our FRCs across the state and has provided additional resources to them from the state ESSER set-aside state agency funding. While there is no doubt of the benefits of FRCs in each elementary schools in Alliance Districts, the cost to districts may vary and there may not be enough funding to successfully meet all of the requirements of the FRC program outlined in CGS Section 10-4o.

Section 11 – The department is currently utilizing \$3.5 million of ARPA funds to expand student participation in dual credit courses that are offered in partnership with Connecticut public and private institutions of higher education (IHE). The expansion will increase the number of students earning college credit while enrolled in high school and increase the number of college credits students earn prior to high school graduation. These credit-based courses can be part of traditional college pathways *or* career-oriented pathways leading to industry-recognized credentials. Dual credit courses can be dual enrollment (taken on a college campus) or concurrent enrollment courses (taken on the high school campus).

The essential activities as part of this initiative include:

- an Expansion Grant Program for public school districts to support the start-up costs for establishing new dual credit course offerings;
- increasing the number of high school teachers credentialed by IHEs to teach dual credit courses;
- a system of accreditation for dual credit programs statewide; and
- new reporting through EdSight to showcase the expanded participation in dual credit courses.

Increasing dual credit opportunities in all districts will maximize the affordability of higher education for Connecticut students. Students who successfully complete dual credit courses can leave high school with a semester or more of college credits on their transcript. Graduates who choose to matriculate to a community college program can continue their credit-based pathway at the college for no-cost through Connecticut's free community college program called [PACT](#). Students can use PACT funding to pursue credit-bearing certificate programs, and even attend part-time (6+ credits/semester). For high school graduates who enter the workforce directly – either by choice or necessity – more of them will have had opportunities to complete career-focused dual credit courses leading to industry-recognized credentials, which are highly valued by employers. These students enter the workforce with marketable skills while simultaneously having earned college credits applicable to a future degree that may be paid using job earnings or in some cases directly by the employer. Additional expansion in this area as contemplated in the legislation will require additional resources - the Governor's Recommended Budget includes an additional \$3.5 million to support dual enrollment.

Section 12 – The department provides this clarification to inform this proposal. When the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 overhauled the USDA nutrition standards and school meals patterns, the school food industry used packaging different from similar products sold in the retail market. The children responded negatively and did not consume the products. When the industry began using packaging that children were more familiar with due to those products being sold in the retail market, the children's consumption of the food increased. The items sold in schools that may have similar packaging, are nutritionally superior and are formulated specifically for the school market to meet federal and state nutrition standards. The familiar packaging encourages consumption of these nutritionally sound items, which achieves the purpose of improving the student's' nutritional health via consumption of nutrient dense healthy foods. If a child does not consume the food, it doesn't matter how healthy it is - they do not receive the nutritional value. Many of these food items come with additional nutritional benefits, such as breakfast cereal. When students select and consume their favorite cereal, they are also consuming the milk and getting critical Vitamin D and Calcium. This language would also greatly reduce the options available to schools (and students) while increasing the costs to the schools due to reduced supply of available options to meet meal pattern requirements.

Section 13 - While the department is not opposed to the concept of an Alliance District grant program to positively impact the school meals programs, there are already rigorous federal and state nutrition standards governing the federal meal programs and food sold outside of such meal programs. School meals and snacks must meet specific standards for whole grains, sugars, fats, protein, sodium, and calories. School food service programs provide nutritionally sound healthy meals for students which, in some cases, are the only meals some students will get on any given day. Additionally, school food staff must meet professional standards and engage in specific continuous professional development. The addition of a trained chef can be a value add to existing school food service programs. The department would need state resources to support implementation and administration of this grant program; this funding was not in the Governor's budget.

S.B. 1164 An Act Concerning a Review of The Regulations Relating to Education

The department supports this proposal and is committed to working with key stakeholders to modernize Connecticut's certification regulations. However, we would respectfully request to have this legislation modified to clarify that the review required shall specifically be limited to certification regulations and not any other regulations that relate to the department. The department has already

begun this important work. Pursuant to PA 22-1, Section 23, the department was charged with conducting a review of the statutes and regulations relating to teacher certification. We partnered with The Region 2 Comprehensive Center (R2CC) to assist in creating a cross walk between our State Statutes and Regulations to identify the legislation that has passed in the last several years to streamline the certification process over time. This information is helping to identify obsolete provisions within our regulations. A report was delivered to this Committee in January. We are now identifying several regulations which we believe, after consultation with key educational partners, could be immediately repealed to remove current barriers. We stand ready to continue the work and report back to the Committee with our progress moving forward.

S.B. 1165 An Act Concerning Financial Literacy Instruction

The department is in support of students across K-12 and specifically in grades 6-12 to have access to financial literacy/personal finance. We would like to note, however, the potential unintended consequence for a student; more specifically, adding an additional ½ credit requirement may eliminate the intended flexibility of the graduation requirements for districts. The intent of the most recent modification of the high school graduation legislation, which was crafted after years of careful and intentional stakeholder engagement, 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. To further underscore, if financial literacy/personal finance is to be a stand-alone requirement it can potentially impact students’ ability to complete a rigorous Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program of Study. Specifically, this could prevent Work-Based Learning placements and attainment of Industry-recognized Credentials. (The department’s metric for Perkins Program Quality is Work-Based Learning experiences.) This is further outlined below.

Work-based Learning (WBL)

If Personal Finance (PF) becomes a mandatory ½ credit elective, it could potentially take the place of a WBL ½ credit. For example, instead of being able to participate in the Unpaid Experiential Learning Program (UELP) or Cooperative Work Education (CWE/DO) and earn a ½ credit, that slot in a student’s schedule could be taken by the ½ credit Personal Finance/Financial Literacy.

Industry-Recognized Credential

If Financial Literacy/Personal Finance becomes a mandatory ½ credit elective, it could result in one less opening for a CTE course in a sequenced Program of Study (POS). That course would most likely be the most advanced course in the POS sequence where the Industry Recognized Credential competencies are embedded. For example, if a student took *Introduction to Culinary* and *Culinary II* but could not fit in *Advanced Culinary Arts*, they would not be able to earn the ServSafe IRC because they needed a slot in their schedule to take the ½ credit PF.

The department’s Academic Office continues to expand on its April 2022 [release](#) of model curricula which included 6-8 Financial Literacy Curricula - Next Generation Personal Finance, a national leader in financial literacy curriculum and programming.

On February 16, the department released 3-5 model math curricula with embedded financial literacy tasks to support elementary teachers to develop financial literacy skills of students in grades 3-5 .

By Fall 2023, the department’s Academic Office will deploy K-2 Model Math Curricula with embedded financial literacy tasks. By which, the CSDE will have developed and distributed Model K-8 Financial Literacy Model Curricula for all Connecticut teachers and students.

S.B. 1166 An Act Concerning Implementation of The Connecticut School Climate Policy

The department has several concerns about the scope of this proposal. The bullying definition in Section 1 (4) does not align with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) definition which includes language regarding the repeated nature of the behavior/action toward others. Repetition is a defining element in identifying bullying, verses a one-time event. Additionally, it is unclear what the terms “abuse of power” means and is open to individual interpretation. Teen dating violence has its own definition, is a different type of aggression and needs to be addressed independent of any association with bullying and therefore should not be included in this definition. Additionally, some of the definitions in this bill differ from those that exist currently in statute, however the bill does not repeal and replace them.

Sections 4 and 5 are prescriptive as to who can serve as the school climate coordinator and specialist, requiring these positions to be administrators. This limits the number of people, especially in smaller districts, who can serve in these capacities. This decision should be left up to district leaders.

We are concerned about the adoption of the National School Climate Standards as the sole approach to address school culture and climate. These standards are developed by a private entity and school districts may incur costs for utilization. The Department was not able to access the standards on the National School Climate Center’s website. The Department respectfully requests that there be time to understand the implications of the sweeping changes and new mandates on districts as outlined in the language in this legislation before these provisions are implemented. Any new implementation requires a systems-based approach including opportunities for professional learning and integration into existing policies and practices in each school district in order to be successful.

H.B. No. 6842 An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and Expansion of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program

The department is supportive of this proposal and offers the following comments on select sections:

Section 1(2) – We would like to offer a suggested correction to the definition of a “Regional farm,” which in this section is defined as “a farm, farmers’ cooperative, food hub or wholesale distributor located in New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, “and” Maine.” Using the word “and” instead of “or” implies that the farm, farmers’ cooperative, food hub or wholesale distributor has to be located in all 6 identified states.

Section 1(f) – The department would prefer to engage the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut to assess the program as needed, and does not believe it is necessary to do this survey annually.

Section 1(k) – As this program is just being developed, the department would ask that this report be moved to January 1, 2025, instead of January 1, 2024, to allow us to fully evaluate the first year of the program.

Sections 2 & 3 – We anticipate that the scope of this work may take more than a 1.0 full time employee to accomplish. It seems that there is funding appropriated for the staff and contracts only for the fiscal year ending 2024. We would need funding to continue to support positions beyond one year. Further, this would require modifications to our school child nutrition claiming system.

While we are supportive of this proposal, we will note that none of these dollars are reflective in the Governor’s Biennial budget.

H.B. 6845 An Act Establishing a State-Wide Book Gifting Program and Home Reading Grant Program for Children

The department encourages families to have an active role in their child’s literacy development and recognizes the value of increasing the number of books available to children in their homes. The department has worked with various organizations over the years (i.e., Hill for Literacy, Literacy How, Raising Readers, State Education Resource Center (SERC), UCONN) to provide early literacy trainings that have fostered meaningful home-school early literacy connections. This raised bill generously appropriates \$500,000 in ARPA funds to the department to support families in building home libraries. The department proposes utilizing these funds to explore the creation of a pilot home-school early literacy program pulling together our partners and various non-profits to train schools and families, provide high-quality books to families, and collect data on the impact of these early literacy efforts.

H.B. 6846 An Act Concerning the Implementation of Crisis Response Drills in Public Schools

We have discussed this proposal with the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP), the entity responsible for the annual receipt of School Safety and Security Plans from all school districts. We recommend that before any changes are made to the current statute regarding the frequency of crisis response drills, we engage with the DESPP School Security Working Group for discussion and recommendations moving forward. Members of this group include many subject matter experts in this area. The department can also include school trauma and mental health staff in the working group to be responsive to the concerns that the bill seeks to address.