



STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS December 2014

INTRODUCTION

Every student in Connecticut, regardless of their zip code, deserves a world-class education. That is the clear message and ongoing commitment of a partnership formed by our organizations, which represent six of the State's leading education and business groups.^[1]

Although our groups represent different stakeholders and perspectives, including school boards, superintendents, principals, advocates, and the business and civic community, we continue to be united in a desire to see systemic change come to our State's public schools. A shared commitment and resources to support implementation of the reforms that were passed in PA 12-116 will be essential in determining whether these changes bring about true transformation or simply more of the status quo. Further systemic improvement is needed if we are to ensure that every child in our State has access to a great public education.

The decisions our State's leaders make in the upcoming months will be particularly important to maintaining momentum. Connecticut's fiscal challenges will force tough conversations and choices about priorities for State spending. Given the importance of education to our State's economic and civic survival, we must renew our commitment to students in the State. **Connecticut has the potential to dramatically transform its public school**

system, but only with ongoing leadership and commitment from all of us who are working to achieve this goal.

In this spirit, our group is dedicated to working together on the following issues and core principles in 2015 to strengthen public education and equip Connecticut's students to live full and productive lives. As the legislative session gets underway we will release more specific recommendations.

We remain dedicated to moving these principles forward.

TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL EVALUATION AND SUPPORT

We know from research that teachers and principals are the most important school-based factors for driving student achievement. Excellent teachers transform children's lives. Similarly, a strong principal provides invaluable support, guidance, and leadership in establishing a positive school culture and coaching teachers to become more effective at their classroom practice.

Ongoing and effective evaluations are an essential tool to help both teachers and principals identify their strengths and areas of growth. Across the country and in Connecticut, the strongest evaluation systems are based on multiple measures, including student achievement, and incorporate professional development and support so that these individuals are better equipped to teach and lead. To ensure that these evaluations lead to real change, rather than mere compliance, we must create local and State capacity for these evaluations to be fully implemented in every school across the State.

We recommend the following:

- **Student achievement growth, measured in multiple ways, remain an essential component in both the evaluations of teachers and principals.**
- **Teachers receive quality professional development closely linked to evaluations so that they can make true strides and improvement where it is needed most.**
- **School and district leaders receive ongoing training and support, given their central role in observing and evaluating the educators on**

their staff. The State **prioritizes funding to support an effective implementation schedule** to fully implement the teacher and principal evaluation tools.

EDUCATOR PREPARATION AND CERTIFICATION

Every Connecticut student deserves to be taught by an effective educator. The first step in building a corps of strong teachers begins with improving the quality of the State's teacher preparation programs.

More work remains to ensure that prospective teachers are indeed graduating from university training programs with full mastery of content and skills, rather than simply fulfilling seat time (credit) requirements for their coursework. Higher education must remain an active partner in evaluating and improving the rigor of Connecticut's new teacher corps.

We recommend the following:

- The accreditation of teacher education programs **include measures that directly focus on teacher effectiveness, such as the results of teacher evaluations and student achievement growth.**
- The State **makes the results of the preparation programs' evaluations available to the public.**
- **Encourage the growth of non-traditional educator training programs**, such as those run by districts or non-profits. These could bring quality options and flexibility to the system and more closely match the needs of schools and students.
- **All training programs require a significant amount of clinical experience in a diverse set of demographic situations.**
- **Revise teacher licensing to base it on demonstrated competency and results in the classroom during the clinical experience.**

STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

If we want to close our achievement gaps and ensure that all of our students are prepared to succeed in a globally competitive marketplace, we must move

away from the traditional “one size fits all” models of schooling. We need to flip the current philosophy of measuring student learning by time on task (“seat time”) to one that sees time as a flexible element and measures learning based on content mastery. In addition, we must provide teachers with the skills and tools needed to personalize student learning and provide each student the greatest opportunity for success, consistent with their primary learning style.

This new system will require us to use technology in innovative ways and to rethink how we use time, allocate resources, and assign both staff and students. It will also mean providing students and families with a variety of public schooling options based on students’ unique learning needs.

A more student-centered learning environment allows for different areas of focus and learning styles, both of which require schools and districts to think differently about how they structure and allocate their resources. Public school choice is one strategy that can help create a learning experience closely tailored to each student’s needs.

We recommend the following:

- The State **removes statutory and regulatory barriers that prevent schools and districts from reforming the relationship between time and learning.** It is overly cumbersome to expect districts to come to the legislature for every exemption and change needed.
- The State **provides increased flexibility and pilot initiatives to allow schools and districts to award credit and degrees for students who can demonstrate content mastery rather than fulfilling Carnegie Units or seat time.**
- The State creates incentives **for districts to reevaluate contracts and restructure them to focus on student learning needs.**
- We believe that state law on **binding arbitration must be amended so that students’ learning needs are the primary factor** guiding the binding arbitration process.
- The State **expands innovative public school options to address the learning needs of every student.**

SCHOOL FINANCE

The challenging budget situation facing Connecticut in the upcoming years provides an important opportunity to consider how education dollars can be spent more strategically and effectively. We strongly believe that the way Connecticut currently funds its public schools is flawed and needs to be fixed. The ECS formula is a challenge to work with from both the educational and municipal perspective.

We encourage State and district leaders to use our scarce education dollars in the most efficient and effective ways possible.

We recommend the following:

- **Utilize a funding formula that is transparent and equitable for students and can be consistently followed by the state to help enable schools and districts to provide every child with an excellent education.**
- **Funding should include students across all schools, including magnet and charter schools.** Connecticut needs an education funding system that fairly funds students at both traditional and nontraditional schools.
- In light of the State's challenging fiscal situation, we strongly advocate that the **State make public school funding a top priority and support the successful implementation of the new reforms.**

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY

All schools and districts in the State must be held to high standards to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for college and career. Connecticut needs to improve its accountability system to make sure that all children get a high-quality education.

Connecticut's current school and district accountability system is based solely on student achievement test scores. Student achievement growth is critical, and should be the primary factor, but should be considered along with several important criteria for determining whether a school or district is serving children well.

As the State move towards full implementation of the new Smarter Balanced assessments (SBAC), Connecticut must adopt a rigorous and holistic framework for accountability that prioritizes student achievement growth and uses multiple measures to determine whether schools and districts are making progress.

We recommend the following:

- The State must **develop a clear definition of college- and career-readiness**. This definition must clearly articulate the knowledge, skills, and character traits students should master in order to achieve success in life.
- The State must then work in partnership with districts to **develop a rigorous and holistic framework for accountability that tracks the progress of district and school improvement on an annual basis**. The accountability framework should include measures of student achievement growth as the primary factor, along with other critical variables, such as student attendance and school climate.
- An improved accountability system must be **paired with increased flexibility for schools and districts that are improving and serving all groups of students well**. School and district leaders that are performing at high levels must be empowered to make good decisions to meet students' needs at the local level.
- The **public must have timely access to data** about how schools and districts are performing. Parents and communities should have easy-to-understand information about the quality of their schools.

RAPIDLY IMPROVE LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

Many students across Connecticut are getting a great public education; however, there are still too many students that attend consistently underperforming schools. Dramatic improvement is needed; the students in these schools shouldn't have to wait any longer for a high-quality education.

Both the Alliance District program and the Commissioner's Network have the potential to dramatically boost student achievement and transform schools, but only if all of the parties involved are equally committed to implementing dramatic change and if funding for these efforts remains intact.

We recommend the following:

- The State must **ensure sufficient capacity to intervene in the lowest performing districts and schools and to provide school districts with support to set and implement effective and transformative improvement plans.** The State Department of Education needs additional internal capacity so that it can serve as a strong partner in the development of effective turnaround plans, which are implemented with the best teachers, leaders, and staff in place.
- Provide schools in the Commissioner's Network with **sufficient flexibility to make effective and strategic decisions** about hiring, teaching assignments, time, instruction, and resource allocation.
- **The State should partner with and support Alliance Districts so that there is sufficient urgency, resources, and capacity to spark bold transformation.** Additional funds should go to those that are making strong improvements and seeing results.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Preparation for the ultimate goals of high school graduation and college and career readiness begins in the earliest grades where the foundations of learning are set. Unfortunately, many students enter preschool and kindergarten already behind their peers in literacy and core skills. Quality early childhood experiences are critical for all students in the State, and they can especially have a meaningful impact for our highest-need students.

We are committed to ensuring that all children have access to programming—beginning at age three—that is developmentally appropriate and staffed by highly effective teachers. The recent expansion of early childhood slots is an important step in the right direction.

We recommend the following:

- The State continues to **strategically target early childhood programs and expanded learning opportunities** so that the children who need them benefit most.
- Continue to **improve teacher quality in early childhood programs as well as ensure that these programs are rigorous and standards-based.**
- **Ensure that parents have access to clear and accurate information about the quality of early childhood programs.**

^[1] Our partnership includes the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS), the Connecticut Business and Industry Association (CBIA), Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN), and the Connecticut Council for Education Reform (CCER).