



CAPSS, CAS, CABE, CBIA, CCER, CONNCAN 2013 Joint Statement

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 In 2012, we worked together to support a landmark package of education reforms in Public Act 12-116. 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. We believe that passing this legislation was an important first step, but now the hard work begins. A shared commitment and resources to support implementation will be essential in determining whether these changes bring about true transformation or simply more of the status quo.

The passage of Public Act 12-116 would not have been possible without the courage and commitment of the state's leaders. Key to this effort were Governor Dannel Malloy, members of the Connecticut General Assembly, the State Board of Education, Commissioner of Education Stefan Pryor, and the State Department of Education (SDE). There remain, however, those in the state who would like to weaken or water down the new reforms. We strongly oppose any rollback. We also know that we cannot stop here—more 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 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. In addition, legislative commissions will be releasing

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).

recommendations for the implementation of many of these new reforms. 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 2013 to strengthen public education and equip Connecticut's students to live full and productive lives. As the legislative session approaches we will release more specific recommendations.

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.

Where things stand: In 2012, a team of teachers, principals, and superintendents worked together as part of the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC) to develop guidelines for a new model teacher and principal evaluation and support program. A new evaluation system based on these requirements was approved by the State Board of Education, and ten sites are currently piloting the evaluation model in this school year. These teacher and principal evaluation models will be administered on an annual basis and will assess performance in multiple ways, including evidence of student achievement growth and observations. The evaluations will eventually be rolled out statewide.

Recommendations: 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 leaders receive ongoing training and support**, given their central role in observing and evaluating the educators on their staff. Principals must be trained not only on how to implement the new teacher evaluations fairly and effectively, but also on how to serve as instructional leaders who can help teachers improve their classroom practice.
- The state **prioritize 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.

Where things stand: Last year, the State Board of Education established the Educator Preparation Advisory Committee (EPAC), a group of stakeholders convened to develop standards that will be used to hold teacher preparation programs accountable for how well their graduates perform on the job. In addition, Public Act 12-116 requires teacher candidates to have four semesters of clinical experience, field experience, or student teaching experience. After July 2016, a teacher must hold a master's degree in an appropriate subject matter area in order to qualify for the professional educator's certificate.

Recommendations: 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 evaluation 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 **make the results of the preparation programs' evaluations available to the public and use the data to hold programs accountable.**
- **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.

Where things stand: There is little in current legislation, Public Act 12-116 included, that directly provides schools with the needed flexibility in time, learning, and resource allocation. We also have constrained systems of public school choice and too limited access to and use of new technologies to aid in student learning. The Alliance District grants may allow districts to pilot new approaches to personalized learning, and a few individual districts and schools are in the process of developing mastery-based programs. However, statutory and resource barriers remain a challenge to their work. In the meantime, other states are far outpacing Connecticut in this area.

To meet the demands of the state’s new accountability system, districts will need more flexibility around use of time, space, and personnel. In addition, the implementation of the new Common Core State Standards will require districts and schools to shift the content and focus of instruction to meet the standards’ more rigorous demands.

Recommendations: 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 **establish clear procedures to provide exemptions from statutes and regulations 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 **provide 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.**

- **Create space and funding for districts to reevaluate contracts and restructure them to focus on student learning needs.**
- **The state expand innovative public school options to address the learning needs of every student.**

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY

Too many of the state's students, schools, and districts are consistently underperforming and dramatic improvement is needed. The students in these failing schools shouldn't have to wait any longer for a high-quality education.

Where things stand: Our group welcomes the new school and district accountability system established by Public Act 12-116. This system will set up differentiated accountability for schools and districts based on the performance of their students and more accurately allow the state to account for movement of students across all proficiency levels. It can also incentivize districts to focus improvements efforts in their lowest-performing schools.

As part of the new Commissioner's Network, the Commissioner and State Board of Education can select up to 25 of the state's lowest-performing schools for the Network. Each of the participating schools must establish a turnaround plan developed by a committee that includes both district and union representation. Thus far, four schools have been approved for the Network and each have made significant changes in staffing and the use of time for learning and professional development.

The legislation also includes a \$39.5 million increase in conditional funding for the 30 lowest-performing districts in the state (the Alliance Districts). These districts submitted reform plans to the SDE in August 2012, and all plans have been approved.

Recommendations: 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 effort remains intact.

We recommend the following:

- The state must **retain the ability to intervene in the lowest performing schools and ensure that districts set and implement rigorous transformation plans.** Working together, the state and districts should ensure that these plans are implemented with the best teachers, leaders, and staff in place.
- **Provide schools in the Commissioner's Network with sufficient flexibility to make strategic decisions about hiring, teaching assignments, time, instruction, and resource allocation.**

- The state should **partner with and support Alliance Districts so that there are sufficient resources to spark bold transformation.** Additional funds should go to those that are making strong improvements and seeing results.

SCHOOL FINANCE

The challenging budget situation facing Connecticut in the upcoming year 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 fundamentally broken, and that the state won't see systemic change until it changes. Tinkering around the margins of the funding formula simply won't be enough.

Where things stand: In order to improve the transparency, efficiency, and consistency around school finance, Public Act 12-116 establishes a Common Chart of Accounts (beginning in June 2015) for all public schools' and districts' revenues and expenditures. In addition, an Education Cost Sharing (ECS) task force was convened beginning in August 2011 to review the effectiveness of the state's funding formula. In January 2013, this group released a set of principles to guide reforms of the ECS formula but stopped short of recommending a complete overhaul of school finance that we believe is so drastically needed.

Recommendations: The increase in ECS aid for Alliance Districts has the potential to drive significant reforms in these districts, but only if real and lasting changes are made—more of the same will continue to shortchange students and their families. We also encourage state and district leaders to use our scarce education dollars in the most efficient ways possible.

We recommend the following:

- **Replace the ECS formula with a system that will better account for student need and town wealth and that is based on what it takes to provide every child with an excellent educational program.**
- **Include all schools, including magnet and charter schools, in a new school funding formula.** Connecticut needs a new education funding system that fairly funds both traditional and nontraditional schools to ensure that all schools have adequate resources with which to provide a high quality education for their students.
- In light of the state's challenging fiscal situation, we strongly advocate that the **state protect public school funding, particularly those resources that will support a successful implementation of the new reforms.**

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.

Where things stand: Public Act 12-116 establishes 1,000 new pre-Kindergarten school seats focused in high-need, low-performing communities. It also requires the SDE to develop a tiered quality rating and improvement system for home-, center-, and school-based early childcare and learning.

To address student literacy challenges, the state will develop a comprehensive early reading implementation plan for struggling readers in Kindergarten through Grade 3. A new statewide reading assessment will enhance early childhood literacy by identifying reading-deficient students early on and allow for targeted interventions. In addition, the SDE, in consultation with the Board of Regents, will design and approve a pre-literacy course for bachelor's degree programs with early childhood concentrations.

Recommendations: 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 expansion of early childhood slots in Public Act 12-116 is certainly important, but it doesn't meet all of the state's needs.

We recommend the following:

- The state continue 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.**