



On Tuesday, January 19, 2021, CAS-CIAC Executive Director Glenn Lungarini was asked to make opening remarks to the statewide Social Emotional Learning and School Climate Advisory Collaborative. Collaborative members include state legislators as well as representatives from CABE, CAPSS, CEA, AFT, PEA, SDE and state institutions of higher learning.

CAS-CIAC Executive Director SEL Collaborative Remarks

The ongoing dialogue within the SEL & School Climate Collaborative demonstrates how committed each leadership group around the table is to providing the absolute best educational experiences to our students. Much of our work in this collaborative has focused on the changes that are necessary in statewide structures and local education frameworks to address growing social emotional needs of our students and equity within school systems.

The Connecticut Association of Schools is a principals' organization. Building level leadership is the bridge between individual teacher goals for growth and development and district-wide planning for student achievement. It is at the principal's level where implementation of state and federal education mandates become reality. Principals are the day-to-day boots on the ground who work to support teachers as they motivate our students and deliver performance data to our superintendents that meet or exceed the expectations of our boards of education.

CAS has had the opportunity to review the thoughtful and detailed plans set forth by CAPSS and CEA. There are initiatives within each plan that share common long-term and short-term goals to improve CT schools. As principals, we assume responsibility for leading our staffs through the right pedagogical shifts to blend these plans into effective practice that enhances the learning experience of every student. So, if we have found common ground on initiatives necessary to bring about equity in our schools, and identified pathways to increase diversity within our profession, why have we not been successful in achieving our goals of closing the opportunity gap?

CAS believes administrator and teacher retention is one area that continues to be an obstacle to achieving our statewide goals. While there are some incentive programs designed to attract high performing teachers to underperforming schools, the main structures of our current educational systems do not support sustaining high performing staff. We still see school principals and district administrators spend, on average, 5 years before moving to another school. This rate is even lower in many of our urban schools and districts. The same movement may be seen among highly effective teachers. As identified by both CAPSS and CEA, a change to the evaluation system, education spending formulas, and standardized testing must be addressed to alter this migration. If not, what incentive will keep teachers or administrators in underperforming schools long enough to elicit positive change when they can relocate to a better performing district, often for an increase in pay?

We know from the extensive research conducted on the change process that it takes approximately seven years to effectively implement new methods or produce an impact on culture and climate. Furthermore, we understand from researchers, like Michael Fullan, that effective change is that which comes from the middle and builds the professional, as well as personal, capacity of those engaged in the change process. Within our schools, it is the collaborative principal, the innovative and motivated teacher, and the engaged and motivated student who drive change. For the most part, that student will remain a steady piece of the equation. However, the principal and teacher most likely will leave the system before the 7-year change process is complete. As such, many of our

underperforming schools are left in a perpetual state of change, where the focus shifts with the arrival of each new principal and the emergence of new teacher leaders within a building. The result is that the students are left with an ambiguous culture and climate that may never motivate the lower performing learner, nor inspire the high performing student, to reach beyond their self-imposed limits.

The evaluation process needs to change. We must reimagine the purpose and process in which we evaluate teachers and administrators to address the full needs of students and school communities. We must place an importance on forging meaningful relationships within our communities and building the self-efficacy our students. We must trust that when we capture the hearts of our students first, we can then engage their minds in far more efficient and effective cognitive learning experiences.

I reflect on initiatives such as school governance councils that, while made up of the same stakeholders, may have a vastly different focus based on the formation of such groups. The scope of governance councils formed to meet a state mandate may strive to reach the performance standard necessary to no longer require such meetings. Conversely, when that same group of stakeholders collaborates in high performing districts, the focus strives to push the limits of individual learner outcomes to become a top school in the state or country.

Discussions on education spending have gone on for far too long. The system is not working. It is the responsibility of legislators to enact a new education cost sharing plan. However, to avoid repeating our historical failed attempts, legislators must entrust the design of a new plan to superintendents, boards of education, principals, and teachers. A commitment must be made from legislative leadership that education cost sharing will be fully funded, and our state's students will receive the financial support necessary to provide equitable opportunities in all communities.

In this moment, our state and nation are focused on navigating our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. While this public health crisis has taken center stage, we must not forget the fact that our state and nation were already in a social, emotional, and mental health crisis well before Connecticut's first COVID-19 diagnosis was made on March 8, 2020. The isolation necessitated by an effective COVID-19 response has only deepened the impact of anxiety and depression on Connecticut's youth. Distance learning experiences are not effective in engaging our students. Yet, if we collaboratively focus on simultaneously addressing the COVID-19 and mental health crisis in Connecticut, we can create a promising and inspiring tomorrow.

CAS-CIAC asks our legislators to trust the exceptional education experts in Connecticut. Provide our boards of education and superintendents with the fiscal resources necessary to drive change. Reimagine educator evaluation to support principals in implementing innovative pedagogical practices and school culture designs that inspire our teachers as well as our students. Repurpose the use and pressures of standardized testing so that it becomes a meaningful tool for our educators and students that drives learning experience beyond individual limits, while providing structured support. Develop standardized curriculums in all content areas to reduce the equity divide that continues to negatively impact Connecticut's students. And, finally, measure the success of our work in terms of the meaningful relationships developed amongst our professionals and students and the contributions that each stakeholder has made beyond his or her own personal gain. A system that drives individuals to contribute toward the attainment of their neighbors' goals as much as their own will be one that produces exceptional academic achievement and sustainable cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and mental well-being.