

**RESPONSE TO THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION AND
COMMISSIONER'S
SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM PROPOSAL**



The Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents

The mission of CAPSS is to lead the continuous improvement of public school education for all students by advocating public policy for children, and by developing and supporting executive school leaders.



The Connecticut Association of Schools

The Connecticut Association of Schools provides exemplary programs and services that promote excellence in the education of all children.



*The Connecticut Association of
Boards of Education*

The Mission of CABE is to assist local and regional boards of education in providing high quality education for all Connecticut children through effective leadership.

March 31, 2008

The Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS), and the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) are committed to pre K-12 school reform and historically have advocated for school improvement initiatives that benefit students, their families and the greater community. Connecticut superintendents, principals, and boards of education have been active participants in numerous state-wide committees charged with improving educational opportunities and related academic performance for all students. Members of all educational leadership groups have been active partners in State Department of Education Secondary School Reform committees and NEASC Standards revision work. As organizations committed to the success of Connecticut's public schools, we embrace the goal that all secondary school students will achieve at high levels, preparing them to learn, to work, and to be contributing citizens in a global, democratic society.

Our respective organizations strongly support the intent of the State Board of Education's proposal for secondary school reform and view this effort as an attempt to further our shared mission of ensuring continuous improvement in the academic performance of all students. Moreover, we view our fundamental responsibility as one of building capacity within our schools for substantially improving student learning

The members of all three educational organizations (**CAPSS, CAS, and CABE**) recognize that too many of Connecticut's high school students are not learning at levels that should be reasonably expected of them, affecting their potential to lead valuable, satisfying lives. The evidence is clear that many students leave school poorly prepared to make their way in the world. Accordingly, our resolve to improve the education of all of our children is propelled by a sense of urgency.

It is the obligation of Connecticut schools to prepare all of our students well. In order to strengthen the manner in which students are prepared, we recommend the following:

Core Knowledge and Skills

Our schools must ensure that all students graduate with the mastery of 21st Century skills. Secondary school students must master and apply the core knowledge and skills identified in a carefully planned course of study designed to prepare them to become contributing citizens. As a means to ensure mastery, schools must employ rigorous annual assessments and periodic, interim benchmark assessments that probe students' depth of understanding. Such assessments must be based on clearly identified content and standards that apply to all students. Connecticut's finest educators should be involved in the development and review of these assessments.

The proposed secondary school reform initiative also should provide resources and support for the development of common formative assessments linked to Connecticut's academic standards and curriculum frameworks, as well as national and international academic performance standards. Also, direct links to the Connecticut Academic

Performance Test and proposed end-of-course or benchmark assessments must be integrated in the design of improved high school assessments.

The results of these assessments should be used to determine how resources are allocated to bring about continuous improvement. We agree and remain committed to the expectation that schools and school districts need to be accountable for the performance of their students.

Connecticut educators should be supported in the acquisition of knowledge and instructional skills necessary to bring about improved student performance. School leaders should be supported in their efforts to create both district and school level continuous improvement plans designed to improve teaching and learning. A substantial change in the work of teachers and school leaders will require a substantial investment in the professional development necessary to achieve the goals of the secondary school reform initiative. The State must commit to substantial investments in professional development to achieve the goals of this school reform initiative.

Rigor, Engagement, and Twenty-First Century Skills and Knowledge

As numerous attempts at reform have shown, rigor does not result simply through acquisition of additional credits. Rather it comes about when educators set the stage for students to participate eagerly in standards-based work they consider valuable, exciting, and challenging. Student engagement increases when their work is rigorous, calls for application of what they have learned and when they feel that they are valued members of the school community. A program that focuses on the personalization of learning for each student is necessary.

Ultimately, if students are to be productive, contributing global citizens, they will have to demonstrate and apply high levels of knowledge and skills in the core academic disciplines. They also will need to demonstrate and apply 21st Century learning and innovation skills. They will need to demonstrate an understanding of other cultures, have an international perspective, be willing to embrace change, and use their education to make a positive difference in their world.

Relative to the State Board of Education secondary reform initiative, we support the following:

- The inclusion of the 2006 Frameworks for Connecticut High Schools report as the context for Secondary School Reform in Connecticut.
- The emphasis on 21st Century skills including: critical thinking, problem solving, written communication, information technology, innovation, creativity, self-direction, collaboration, leadership, and work ethic.
- The proposed legislation to acquire support and funding for a comprehensive cost analysis of the impact on state and local budgets of the reform proposals,

especially the costs involved in providing additional staff for required courses and implementation of senior projects, development and review of individual student learning plans, professional development for administrators and teachers, provision of “Safety Net” programs and services, including the possible extension of the school day or school year.

- Consideration of the developmental needs of students who will struggle with additional requirements and require multiple pathways and opportunities to demonstrate mastery.
- The identification of viable assessment alternatives, multiple assessment opportunities, support resources, and remediation programs for students who struggle to meet the requirements, especially students requiring special education services, 504 plans, or English Language Learner support systems.
- Clearly identified state standards and expectations for all Connecticut students, be they rural, suburban, or urban.
- Allocation of resources that ensures that school reform efforts address the achievement gap in Connecticut.
- Continuous input concerning secondary reform and development of strategies to ensure student success from building level leaders pre K-12, especially middle schools leaders.
- Involvement of teachers, principals and superintendents in the process of gathering input on the reform proposals and working on specific planning.
- Culminating senior demonstrations such as projects, internships, portfolios, exhibitions, and other experiences that require students to demonstrate in authentic circumstances what they have learned.
- Comprehensive professional development for teachers and school leaders for instructional improvement and student engagement.
- Rigorous standards-based assessments that will enable school leaders to employ timely, meaningful, and accurate data when making decisions about curriculum and instruction.
- Multiple assessment opportunities for all students to demonstrate attainment of state standards.
- Personalization of education through adult mentoring and individual student success plans.

Relative to the state board of education secondary reform initiative, we recommend the following:

- A system that allows for the integration of state, district, school and classroom student assessment data that is useful, reliable, and standards-based.
- Useful and reliable benchmarks assessments throughout the grades to monitor students' progress toward meeting secondary school requirements.
- Opportunities for middle school and high school curriculum development to build upon the work already accomplished in the development of a well-sequenced elementary curriculum that provides depth of instruction and challenge.
- A structure that allows for coordination of the 9-12 curriculum with the programs of Connecticut colleges and technical schools.
- Aligning reform proposals with New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) standards.
- Considering school reforms from a pre K-16 perspective.
- Requiring four credits of mathematics with multiple, related state assessments for Algebra I and geometry.
- Continuing to involve Connecticut secondary and higher education teachers in the development of state standards and assessments aligned with Connecticut frameworks.
- Developing incentives for high school graduates who complete rigorous requirements such as tuition reduction at state colleges and universities.
- Developing initiatives to attract and retain the most qualified teachers necessary to implement increased requirements.

Relative to the state board of education secondary reform initiative, we have four major areas of concern:

1. The drive for reform could leave the state's schools with more tests and little else. The secondary reform initiative requires the funding and structural supports for professional development for teachers and administrators, collaborative assessment development, and pre-K through 12 systemic reforms.
2. Significant resources will be required to implement the reform initiative over multiple years. Without significant resources, there is the possibility that the challenges facing urban and rural schools in implementing the reform components could exacerbate the state's already significant achievement gap.

3. It is important that the outcomes of this reform work reinforce the primary purpose of education which is not only to support economic growth and prepare graduates for the world of work, but also to educate all students to support and sustain a democratic and civil society.

4. In addition to its focus on a core curriculum for all students, high school reform should validate and emphasize the importance of the arts in the lives of our students. It should make certain that the recommendations for reform enhance the opportunities for education and enrichment in the arts. Paradoxically, fine, performing and practical arts opportunities may be the best venues for developing the 21st Century skills (critical thinking, problem solving, written communication, information technology, innovation, creativity, self-direction, collaboration, leadership, and work ethic).

We commend the State Board's and the Commissioner's efforts to lead secondary school reform and to solicit responses and recommendations from stakeholders in Connecticut, particularly educational practitioners, board of education members and school and district leaders. The three recently-established working committees: **Revision and Implementation, Middle School Working Group, and Higher Education Working Group** certainly represent a positive sign. We stand ready as organizations both to offer additional input as the proposals develop and to support new initiatives that are designed and implemented in a manner that increases the probability of achieving the agreed upon and intended outcomes.