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TO: Superintendents of Schools

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FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

SUBJECT: Back-to-School Message – AUGUST 17, 2001

**NO SCHOOL IS AN ISLAND:
A Missing Piece in American and Connecticut Public Education –
A Better Knowledge of the World and its People**

This summer represents my eighth back-to-school message. In preparation, I reflected on themes of the past: **Greater Expectations** for students and staff; our unique and collective roles in **Working Together; Early Childhood and Early Reading Success; Continuous Improvement in Student Achievements and in Reducing Student Isolation; Connecting With and Developing Character in Every Student; Closing the Achievement Gaps** for students in poverty and African-American and Hispanic-American students; and developing a new generation of the **Highest-Quality Teachers and Administrators**. We have seen some progress in each of these areas, yet our job is not done. These priorities remain on our agenda.

The **growing crisis in teacher/administrator quality and shortage, and the continuing need to close the achievement gaps are clearly the greatest statewide educational policy challenges for Connecticut** in the coming decade. At the state level, we'll be spending much of our time on these two issues. There is, however, another issue that touches every classroom and every student which requires our immediate attention: **the need for greater knowledge of the world**.

In the broadest and long-term context, we have every right to be proud of Connecticut's public school system and its many successes. However, we are only as good as the passion with which we pursue the success of **every** student. So while we continue to pursue the above goals, the philosophy of continuous improvement demands that we regularly identify our greatest weaknesses. It is in that spirit that I put this issue before you and all our colleagues.

No school is an island, capable of completely educating its students in isolation. Every young mind thrives and grows immeasurably through its interaction with others. Isolated, individuals become limited, fearful and mistrusting of others. All of this points to the need for Connecticut students to go beyond the confines of their schools and communities. We need to reach out to others. Future learning must include more of a **worldwide focus and understanding** or we risk denying our next generation its opportunity for greater achievements.

No state can lay claim more than Connecticut to focusing on reading, writing and mathematics achievement, particularly in the early grades. We have been right to do that. However, the realities of "a smaller world" and the opportunities presented by "international education" keep surfacing as significant omissions in our educational goals and curriculum.

In Connecticut, we have a state **obligation to reduce student isolation** and a statutory requirement to provide all students with educational experiences with students and staff members from other racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. No school or district can claim that it delivers high-quality education if it takes place on an island.

Do we believe that American 10-year-olds know as much about China as their Chinese counterparts know about America? No – and in this respect, we may be far behind much of the rest of the world. Have we sufficiently **studied other countries, languages, cultures, their history and arts, their governments and economics, their geography and resources, and their strengths and needs?** No – and we are missing a great opportunity for learning.

There are strong **human and economic imperatives** to using a worldwide component in each of our subject matters. Integrating this perspective across the fields of study is much more efficient and effective than adding a new course of study. In addition, each of us should pursue **engaging every student in the study of a second language** in early elementary school, broadening that learning experience to include culture, history, etc., and providing teachers and students **more opportunities for exchange and communication with those from other countries** by travel and the use of technology. Our present-day knowledge of learning, human growth and development, a wide variety of teaching techniques and technology makes us more able than ever before to help all children to become more aware of – and **more comfortable and effective in – the world around them.**

Some critics might say, “Stick to the three Rs.” Others might say, “Global studies should be the core curriculum.” **The best answer for Connecticut in 2001 is a balanced one – ensuring the acquisition of basic skills and good character by every student, but with an expanded understanding of the rest of the world and its peoples.** The philosophy of “balance” acknowledges that the world has much to learn from the United States of America, but that we also have much to learn from other nations.

The 2001 session of the **Connecticut General Assembly** took up this issue and we thank the leadership of the Education Committee for its forward thinking. Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-27 now reads,

- (a) It shall be the policy of the state to encourage its students, teachers, administrators and educational policy makers to participate in international studies, international exchange programs and other activities that advance cultural awareness and promote mutual understanding and respect for the citizens of others countries.
- (b) The Commissioner of Education shall establish an international education advisory committee to explore international opportunities for learning, exchange programs and the availability of curriculum materials . . .

Our increasing expectations for the achievements of our students demand no less of us. It is our failure to look beyond our borders and our satisfaction with the past and present that may keep us from seeing what should exist . . . a public elementary and secondary school curriculum that opens the windows to the world. The history of the progress of human civilization demonstrates that **the collective ability to improve the quality of life far outweighs that of any one community, one country or one people.**

Taking steps to expand our students’ knowledge of the world is consistent with our “greater expectations” to develop a generation of young people capable of achieving at higher levels, demonstrating sound character and better prepared to solve the problems of the future.

If each school, district and organization were to consider WHAT CAN WE DO? that addresses this need (without necessarily adding more time or spending more resources), we could have a significant impact. Often, **one well-designed initiative** has a multiplier effect. And the effort is unquestionably worthwhile. Educators involved in any aspect of “international education” testify to its relevancy and motivational power with students of all ages.

America’s greatness has been its ability to reach out to the world and embrace the best contributions of all its peoples. The members of our next generation need to have the skills, abilities and understandings to lead the world and be good neighbors. **But they cannot and will not lead, and live peacefully in, a world they know little about.**

My best wishes for a productive and rewarding school year for you, your staff and all your students.

