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CIRCULAR LETTER: C-12

TO: Superintendents of Schools

DATE: August 15, 2002

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Commissioner of Education

SUBJECT: Back-to-School Message – August 15, 2002

Connecticut's Public Schools: Relentlessly Pursuing Success for Every Student and Relentlessly Attacking Our Achievement Gaps

These are very difficult economic times for local, state and federal government, and for the education community nationwide. However, the principles of good leadership demand that we continue our focus on the core of our enterprise – through good times and bad – and that is the continuous improvement of our students' achievements. This is the time **for each superintendent to take local leadership on this issue**, and with the action of the local school board, **make a public priority of "attacking our achievement gaps."** Now more than ever, our words and actions must state clearly that these gaps are unacceptable, that they should not be tolerated, and that we can do better. There are actions we can take, using data to inform our decisions, involving teachers and parents and focusing resources in new ways to identify and close gaps in student achievement. We need to look to each other to craft effective strategies and work better together for one purpose—student success. We need to reach out and engage every helping hand, every parent, grandparent, family member, mentor and community leader. I am encouraged by the efforts I have seen in many communities as they take on this important challenge. We must continue this work, and we must do more.

As our schools reopen and our classrooms assemble, I am pleased to help welcome our more than half a million students and 49,000 teachers back to school: to a new year of learning on the way to a wonderful future.

While every day in school should be fun, challenging, rewarding and satisfying in its own right, it must also be another strong step in the direction of lifelong achievement, independence, good citizenship, health and well-being.

It is no accident that those words are reminiscent of the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in our nation's Declaration of Independence. Education is fundamental to democracy, and each of us has a role to play in making sure that all students can both contribute to and benefit from the democratic way of life we enjoy.

All of our students deserve great schools, great opportunities, great achievements. Many Connecticut students have those things; too many do not. By many measures — from the Connecticut Mastery Test and Connecticut Academic Performance Test to the SATs and Advanced Placement Tests — Connecticut's achievements and achievement gaps are clear.

The Challenge

There are significant differences in achievement between rich students and poor, white and African-American and Hispanic students, boys and girls, native English speakers and limited-English-proficient students, and students with disabilities and those without. Gaps exist not just between communities, but within every community and within every school.

Yes, Connecticut as a state education system and its local communities have done very well in national and even international comparisons, and Connecticut educational progress over the last decade is as great as any state's. However, average scores mask the large separation between Connecticut's many high achievers and its low achievers. Recent state legislation and funding, including state grants for preschool, early reading success, and after-school and summer programs in our major cities, are very helpful and on the right track — but they are not enough, because we have not reached every school and every child.

I wish there were more federal, state and local resources for this mission of reaching every school and every child, and I and many others will continue to argue for additional support. However, **nothing should keep us from attacking the achievement gaps** that are evident in the student performance data we see on a continuing basis.

A Role for Each of Us

These achievement gaps must become a foundation of every discussion, every policy and action on the agenda of every local school board. Board members and Superintendents must look at test scores, other indicators of student performance, and the wide range of school improvement issues, and ask, **How are we doing? How can we do better? Are we closing our achievement gaps?** They also must look for ways to provide additional instructional support for students who need it.

Every teacher, administrator and curriculum expert should analyze student performance data by racial, poverty, special need and gender group and by school, and then **take new steps to change instruction.**

Every parent, grandparent and family member must value learning and communicate its importance by both words and actions. By keeping in touch with their children's teachers, checking on homework, talking about what happens in school, reading with their children, reading and learning on their own — setting the example of lifelong learning.

Perhaps most important, **all of us** must increase our expectations of what all students — including poor children, children of color, students whose first language is not English and students with disabilities — can do. **Our expectations of our children become their aspirations.** As early as preschool age, at home and in school, all students must hear over and over again, **"With hard work, you can succeed in anything you choose to do, and you are going to college."**

What Works

We know how to help every student succeed:

- universal preschool and full-day kindergarten;
- every first grader a confident reader;
- world language instruction starting in kindergarten/first grade;
- teaching good character and personal responsibility;
- teaching the basic concepts of algebra and geometry beginning in the third grade;
- one-on-one tutoring and mentoring;
- a more hands-on, active and personal approach in middle school;
- in high school, more academic rigor, college credit, independent study, community service, and transitions to higher education and work;
- school buildings open year-round, and more time for learning;
- more and better use of technology;
- reducing student isolation and integrating global studies;
- staff training and school improvement plans that focus on student achievements and are guided by results; and
- more choice of schools and programs, and engaging parents/families, volunteers and others in student learning.

The Will to Succeed

In preparation for this year's message, I reflected on my 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; developing a new generation of the **Highest-Quality Teachers and Administrators**; and **No School is an Island: A Missing Piece in American and Connecticut Public Education – A Better Knowledge of the World and its People**. We in Connecticut have made some real progress in each of these areas, yet our job is not done. These messages of the past have appropriately laid the foundation for this year's renewed focus on our gaps.

We know we need more resources in order to reach every child, but we also know that we can do much better with the resources we have. We know we need each other: schools have a role, families have a role, community organizations have a role.

We also know that doing better — with or without added resources — requires change. We need actions, not merely words. Neither people nor systems change quickly, but if we **believe** we can do better, and if **we take actions** to do better, change will come. We will help more students achieve. To paraphrase the new federal legislation, **we will leave no child behind.**

In the 2002-03 school year, we will begin a major, multiyear, multipronged initiative of state and local government leaders, corporate and labor representatives, community-based organizations, school boards, educators and citizens focused on their unique and complementary roles in helping to close the gaps.

Closing Connecticut's achievement gaps while improving the achievement of every student is the greatest challenge of this decade, the first great educational challenge of the new century. Connecticut has proven it knows how to improve student achievement, and has demonstrated the will and the ability to begin closing its achievement gaps. Now, with the most talented and dedicated public school teachers and administrators in the world, and with new energy, Connecticut must reach every child. I know we can.

Welcome back to school. I hope 2002-2003 will be the best year of our careers.

2002-2003

This year will present some challenges and priorities for our state and its 166 school districts:

- This year we will reflect back on the events of September 11, 2001, and the success of Connecticut's public schools in helping students and families recover. I am hopeful that each school district and school will continue the good work of last year in calmly helping students and staff members to have hope for a more peaceful world in the future. Please reach out and use all the knowledge and resources available to assist you in this important part of our work; and please note that under Public Act 02-126, Governor Rowland will be proclaiming September 11th as "Remembrance Day, in memory of those who lost their lives or suffered injuries in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and in honor of the service, sacrifice and contributions of the firefighters, police officers and other personnel who responded to such attacks. Suitable exercises shall be held in the State Capitol and elsewhere as the Governor designates for the observance of the day."
- This year Connecticut will begin implementation of the new federal education law No Child Left Behind. We are beginning many new activities to comply with the new law, including the development and piloting of improved CMT tests in reading, writing and mathematics for Grades 3-8 which will be introduced statewide in 2005-06. We are also preparing for new accountability requirements and teacher quality standards.
- We will continue our emphasis on providing every child with opportunities to receive preschool services and a better bridge from preschool to kindergarten.
- We must continue our efforts to prepare enough qualified teachers and administrators to meet the demands of our 166 school districts. We must replace as many as 19,000 teachers in the next 10 years, and we must address serious shortages in key disciplines such as mathematics, special education, bilingual education, Spanish and other areas.
- We must expand our most successful efforts to reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation.