



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



The Commissioner's Annual Back-to-school Meeting for Superintendents
Keynote Address by Education Commissioner Dr. Dianna R. Wentzell
August 22, 2016

Thank you, it is truly an honor to be with you today and to serve as your colleague in this role.

I also wish to thank Chairman Taylor and the entire State Board of Education for their dedicated service. They are truly leaders who are motivated by a passion to do what is best for our students.

I'm also grateful to Governor Malloy and Lieutenant Governor Nancy Wyman for their leadership and unwavering commitment to equity and excellence in education.

Connecticut is not only home to the greatest teachers and students, but also to the greatest educational partners. I'd like to take a moment to recognize and thank all our wonderful partners who have joined us today. Thank you for all that you do in support of our students' success.

We are so fortunate to work collaboratively with Joe Cirasuolo of CAPSS, Bob Rader of CABE, Karissa Niehoff of CAS. Thank you for being here with us today.

I want to thank our Hartt Community Division students for their incredible opening performance today. Can we have another round of applause for our student musicians?

And in the spirit of gratitude, I would also like to recognize Anne Kubitsky, the amazing artist behind the Look for the Good art installation you saw when you walked in today. I encourage you to stop by the project and add your own personal contribution about what you are grateful for.

This morning I will tell you I am incredibly grateful for all of you and for everything you do on a daily basis for children.

The start of a new school year is so exciting. For those of us that live our lives in public education the countdown to the first day of school is full of eager anticipation. This is really our new year's eve, our happy new year. As we reflect on the year just past and look forward to the promise of a new school year, it is important that we consider where we've been, where we are going, and most importantly, who we are.

Together we serve 541,815 students. We at CSDE are so proud to support you as you lead our schools to provide an excellent education for our students and families. In over 1,400 public schools or specialized programs, almost 52,000 certified public educators strive each day to support equity and excellence for our students.

We have so much to be proud of on the education front in Connecticut.

Record high graduation rates.

Significant gains in reading and math after our first two years of the Smarter Balanced assessment.

Readers who are among the best in the nation, according to our NAEP results. Connecticut schools are regularly praised as among the top in the country on countless national lists and ratings.

Among our greatest points of pride, I will include Connecticut's steadfast commitment to welcoming all children and families – including immigrants and refugees; including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students; including populations that in other states and other places have not been met with the same open doors, nurturing environment, and commitment to high expectations for *all* that we pride ourselves on in Connecticut.

In Connecticut, we also recognize the importance of recommitting ourselves to the values that make up the core of who we are as a state and as a community of educators.

This was a very significant year for the State Board of Education. A year ago, our board embarked on a journey to develop and launch a five-year comprehensive plan. They committed to a process that involved extensive engagement of stakeholders—from educators and advocates, to students and families, to civil rights organizations and community health partners, higher ed institutions, and non-profits, business affiliates, and the list goes on.

Through that process, the board received more than 15,000 comments from over 6,700 survey respondents. Thousands of residents across the state shared with us their aspirations, their challenges and their concerns around education in Connecticut.

The feedback we received during this process was incredible. And when we pulled everything together, it began to tell the story of Connecticut's vision for a bright, vibrant future for all kids. What we heard running through so many of the comments and ideas is that students are at the core of everything we do; that we need to find a way to serve all students; and that all really does mean *all*.

This became the focus of our five-year comprehensive plan – ensuring equity and excellence for all students. Out of that focus came four promises to our students:

- 1) We will do everything we can to ensure their non-academic needs are met so they are happy, healthy and ready to learn.
- 2) We will support their school and district in staying on target with learning goals.
- 3) We will give them access to great teachers and school leaders.
- 4) So that ultimately we will make sure they learn what they need to know to succeed in college career and life.

We have the momentum of progress on our side as we embrace these promises and commit to accelerating the pace of change for our students and families.

In Connecticut, we are proud of our record high graduation rate of 87.2 percent for the Class of 2015. Graduating from high school is a huge accomplishment made possible through years of hard work, commitment to goals, and growth.

We are extremely proud of our rising graduation rate for schools in our Alliance Districts. The graduation rates for the Alliance District schools reached 77.6 percent in 2015, up from 71.2 percent in 2011. The state's 10 highest need Education Reform districts saw an even more dramatic increase over the past five years of 8 points, up to 71.6 percent.

We are proud of our students rising to the challenge of higher expectations and demonstrating strong growth on the Smarter Balanced exam. As you know – and I am sure you were all eagerly awaiting – last week we released our second year of Smarter Balanced scores. The results show solid improvement statewide in both ELA and math, across all grades, and for all high-needs subgroups.

That tells us that the system is working. That tells us that the yeoman's work that you, your principals, and your teachers put into the transition to the more rigorous Connecticut Core standards is having an impact on students.

Again, we are proud of our Alliance Districts for meeting challenges head-on and embracing innovation to improve outcomes for many high needs students. All of our Alliance Districts showed improvement in ELA on Smarter Balanced and most showed improvement in math, with about half of Alliance Districts improving at a faster rate than the state, a testament to the success of targeted support and investment in our highest need districts.

And it's not just our Alliance Districts and Commissioner's Network schools that emerge as bright spots. There are beacons of success and bright lights throughout our state. Suburban, urban, and rural districts alike knocked it out of the park. We are so eager to hear from you and are excited to learn from you.

We are proud that the first administration of the Connecticut SAT School Day was a success. Now every 11th grader in a public school in Connecticut has the opportunity to take a college and career readiness exam, which is often an important step to applying for college. The Governor's leadership on this issue resulted in a move that advances our equity goals. It also responds to parent and student concerns about testing burdens in high school.

During Governor Malloy's administration, we have invested more than a half billion dollars in education since he took office in 2011 – a 24 percent increase over that period of time.

We are seeing those investments make a real difference in students' lives across the state. Last winter, we celebrated a number of schools exiting turnaround status for the first time, including two schools – Bloomfield High School and New London High School – that exited with flying colors. With the new release of Smarter Balanced results, we are seeing some of our Commissioner's Network schools in Norwich, New Haven, East Hartford, and Windham demonstrating significant improvement in both ELA and math.

In Connecticut, we value the opportunity to engage in rigorous course work and we are so proud that 76 percent of our schools now offer AP courses. We recognize that some of our students who demonstrate potential are still not able to access rigorous course work and we look forward to supporting our schools as they find ways to support rigor, relevance and personalization at all levels.

We are proud to be sharpening Connecticut's focus on the academic needs of students with special needs, including talented and gifted students and those considered twice exceptional. This year we launched a new Bill of Rights for families of children who receive special education services.

We are so proud of our teachers, for being on the front lines every day making dreams possible for our students. Their commitment to our children offers Connecticut and our country the gift of a bright future.

We are proud of our very own national Teacher of the Year, Waterbury social studies teacher Jahana Hayes, who is representing Connecticut on the national education scene. Jahana carries the torch for the importance of instilling civic responsibility and an appreciation of community service in students. And she is giving voice and elevating the conversation around attracting and retaining more black and Hispanic teachers into our classrooms.

This year, Governor Malloy supported and signed legislation aimed at strengthening minority teacher recruitment efforts across the state. It's critically important that our students learn from educators who reflect Connecticut's rich cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity. Of our nearly 52,000 certified educators, only 8.4 percent are minority certified staff. Compared to our student body, which is 44 percent minority, we are missing the mark. We can and must do better at attracting and retaining teachers and principals of color.

In Connecticut, we are proud of the decline in suspensions and expulsions in schools and we recognize that this accomplishment is a testament to the work being done to address this challenge. You are accomplishing this by engaging partners, identifying best practices, and providing training on family engagement, mental health referrals, de-escalating confrontation and restorative justice.

We are proud to see districts and schools embracing Governor Malloy's Second Chance Society reforms that focus rehabilitation and strengthening communities by keeping students in school and disrupting the so-called school to prison pipeline.

We are proud that we are signing up more schools to serve breakfast to kids and we are very, very proud that our summer meals program reached a new milestone this year of having over 700 locations across the state where children can access free, nutritious meals during a time of year when that is not always a given.

I think you get the idea now that we have a lot to be proud of in Connecticut when it comes to education. I think we need to allow ourselves more time and space to celebrate the success stories and progress we are making in our schools and districts.

And we know that we have to seize this moment, embrace this momentum, and move forward with urgency if we are to accomplish our goal of closing achievement gaps and delivering on our promise to all students. As educators who are called into this noble profession, we must hold fast to the shared belief—that no matter a child’s life circumstance—we believe in the potential for greatness in every child.

We have to do more to support black and Hispanic students so they graduate high school on a level playing field with their white peers and can achieve whatever success they pursue in life. We have to close the achievement gap between students from low-income families and those who come from families with more resources. We have to do more to meet the unique needs of our English language learners and our students who receive special education services.

Likewise, we have to do more to raise student achievement across the board – especially in math. Last year when we were all together for this meeting I made a promise that I would convene a Commissioner’s Council on Mathematics, bringing together educators, industry and business leaders, and experts in math and STEM instruction. That group met diligently for the last year researching best practices, both in Connecticut and across the nation, and exploring innovative strategies in the areas of math instruction. That council will release its final report and recommendations in the fall.

Another critical area where we must intensively focus attention is student disengagement. In 2014-15, 10.6 percent of K-12 students – which is over 56,000 students – were chronically absent during the school year. By grade 9, that number rises to 13.7 percent and by the 12th grade, 18 percent of students are chronically absent in a school year.

While this data is concerning, we know that the solutions to widespread disengagement are found in our Connecticut Public Schools. Even from what we can see in the data, we can use appreciative inquiry to identify high schools where students who entered with the three markers I have mentioned are successfully on track at the end of ninth grade. I encourage you as you begin the process of your district data teams and your school data teams to approach these activities with a few critical inquiry questions.

Data invites inquiry. What we learn from the inquiry informs action. Please study your trends and pay as much attention to what is going well as what is not, yet where you hoped it would be. The opportunity to use the two years of Smarter Balanced data to evaluate curriculum and program effectiveness is a critical opportunity for this year. I implore you to incorporate students at risk for disengagement into your study, especially at school transition points.

One of our greatest achievements this past year as the State Department of Education is the launch of our Next Generation Accountability System. It offers a new, broader set of performance indicators designed to give a more comprehensive and holistic picture of how schools and students are performing. We so appreciate CAPSS for the engagement over the two years in creating this system.

And with the launch of our Accountability System came the launch of EdSight – our new long-awaited and highly anticipated data portal. Through increased transparency and ease of use, this new system will help us understand where we need to focus efforts to make sure we are delivering on our promise to students.

This fabulous support to making data-informed decisions is enable us to pursue our approach of appreciative inquiry – to study what is going well for our kids and replicate those conditions and practices. To shine a spotlight on improvements and growth that spur us on to greater achievement for our students.

Each of you, each day, leads your organization to greater excellence and equity for children. You do this because of what you believe, and because of who you are, and I feel so honored to be your colleague. I want to recognize and celebrate our Superintendent of the Year, Colleen Palmer of Westport Public Schools, for inspiring us with your leadership and dedication to kids. In Connecticut, we believe in collaboration and partnership. We at the CSDE are proud to be your partners in the work on behalf of our students and their families.

At this point I would like to recognize the state department of education senior leadership team and management. I am so proud of our team and of all of our staff at the State Department of Education. As I told you last year, we are small, but mighty. Our staff works tirelessly with dedication to put their expertise and support behind you in the work we do together for our kids.

We know that the work ahead is challenging. We know the stakes are high for our kids. They are depending on us to get them ready for their futures.

I believe that, together, we can do what's needed for our kids.

All of us at the State Department of Education wish you, your staff, and the children and families you serve a wonderful school opening to the 2016-17 school year.

Thank you.