

CAPSS Public Policy Agenda & Blueprint Update

2023



CAPSS PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA 2023



Each year, the CAPSS Legislative Committee and Board of Directors review the current conditions and most pressing needs in public schools as well as the *CAPSS Blueprint to Transform Connecticut's Public Schools*, released in early 2021. Then they select several priorities for the next year's Public Policy Agenda.

What follows is the CAPSS Public Policy Agenda 2023. While reflective of the *Blueprint*, this agenda focuses on the highest priorities to be addressed, including the allocation of greater and more equitable resources for public schools and the expectation of stronger student success.

1. ECS

CAPSS supports the work of the Connecticut School Finance Project but remains concerned about those towns slated to lose ECS funds and the use of ECS funds for local property tax relief as opposed to education.

Recommendation(s): The General Assembly and Governor should continue to refine the ECS formula to focus funds on the neediest districts while recognizing their education challenges and the local capacity to pay. The size of the pie and the State's share must grow yearly with a more substantial long-term commitment. No town should lose funds from the 2020-2021 base year, and there should never be mid-year rescissions.

2. SPECIAL EDUCATION

The *Blueprint* identifies a list of categorical grants requiring greater state funding and improved statutory language. However, the Special Education Excess Cost Grant is a critical priority and must be significantly addressed in 2023. After decades of promises to share the financial burden, the failure of both the federal and state government to do so places the financial burden on local municipalities.

Recommendation(s): Fully fund the Excess Cost Grant in 2023 and each year thereafter with an equitable distribution among towns.

3. READING

CAPSS has been a consistent voice on the need for statewide improvement in early reading and embraces the Science of Reading approach. CAPSS fully supports the 2021 Reading Legislation with the exception of mandated reading programs.

Recommendation(s): (1) There should not be a mandate for specific reading materials; (2) School districts should embrace the Science of Reading and have a literacy curriculum built on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.



4. TEACHER EVALUATION

For 40 years, the CSDE has tried to provide guidance and support for local teacher evaluation programs. The most recent statutory requirements have been virtually abandoned in most states. The best solution would be a fresh start with minimal broad state guidance and local initiatives with annual attestation of continuous evaluation for all staff.

Recommendation(s): Eliminate the current educator evaluation system. Provide opportunities for districts to develop innovative and creative evaluation systems that reflect new and effective instructional methodologies. This new system should be based on the Common Core of Teaching and be supported by practitioners serving as coaches.

5. TEACHER SHORTAGE

CAPSS supports a thoughtful and well-planned significant decrease in requirements for all teacher/administrator certifications. The certification process should focus more on demonstrating “good teaching” through more and better student teaching and accepting prior successful experience as a part of the credential review.

Recommendation(s): CAPSS looks forward to the recommendations in the State Department of Education’s Report on Certification due to the Legislature on January 1, 2023.

6. VIRTUAL LEARNING

CAPSS sees the value in high-quality Remote & Virtual Learning in meeting the multi-faceted learning needs of all students. The personalization efforts already underway statewide will be enhanced by greater access to remote learning and greater offerings in a virtual classroom.

Recommendation(s): (a) The State should provide local boards of education discretionary power to utilize up to 3 remote learning days per school for emergency closures. Any number of days beyond 3 days would need approval by the Commissioner of Education; (b) The State should develop a regional concept for a model that includes virtual and in-person learning that opens learning to the same content areas for all students.

7. FEDERAL ARP ESSER FUNDS

CAPSS supports changes to state and federal law that would allow the unique use of these funds and allow a longer period to complete the expenditure of these funds.

Recommendation(s): State law should be amended to allow for the local match of school construction to use either or both local educational and town ARP funds as the match. Federal law should be amended to allow for an additional three years (2027 in place of 2024) for the expenditure of all three rounds of ARP ESSER funding.

8. PRE-K AND ESL FUNDING

CAPSS supports two items that should help restore and improve academic achievement: Additional funding for preschool; and additional funding for ESL and bilingual education.

Recommendation(s): Add state funding to these accounts, amend state statutes as needed and require additional time and one-on-one tutoring, and other supports, for the most challenged students.

PROGRESS OF 2021 & 2022

CAPSS wishes to thank all those who took up the fight against COVID-19 and recognizing its negative impact on students, staff, and families.

The Connecticut General Assembly and Governor took several additional steps in the right direction in 2022, including:

ECS

Continued phasing in the newest Education Cost Grant formula with an additional \$40 million (with no losing districts);

SPECIAL EDUCATION

For the first time in years, increased the Excess Cost Grant: added an equity component to it; and provided professional training for paraprofessionals, with a combined investment of \$19 million;

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Created 1,300 more infant/toddler slots, shored up the financial and programmatic viability of early childhood programs, and increased early childhood subsidies with \$212 million of new funds;

MENTAL HEALTH

Established new programs to address children's mental health with \$103 million to expand the number of mental health professionals in schools, doctors' offices, and other locations; enhanced funding for School-Based Health Clinics; and augment services for children with behavioral health issues;

STRUCTURAL RACISM

Committed to addressing structural racism in schools with funding of \$14 million for a new State Department of Education Minority Teacher Scholarship program, FAFSA assistance, more summer enrichment programs, and increased dual enrollment between high schools and higher education institutions;

SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

Provided \$65 million in additional resources to fund the changes in the "Sheff Stipulated Agreement," to reduce tuition costs of magnet schools' sending districts; and to pay for more charter school slots and subsidy levels;

BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Doubled the State grant from \$1.9 M to \$3.8 M



TEACHER PENSION

Transferred the FY 2022 surplus (estimated at \$900 million) to increase the long-term financial stability of the Teachers' Retirement Fund;

STUDENT WELL-BEING

Improved students' health with almost \$420 million in funding for improved clean air in schools, assistance to purchase non-diesel buses, feeding programs, lead-free homes, and the state share of nine major School Construction projects;

TEACHER RETIREMENT HEALTH

Recalibrated the Teachers Retirement Health programs with a new program that saves \$17 million per year, and increased retiree monthly stipends from \$220 to \$440 (net savings of \$12.3 million);

LEARNER ENGAGEMENT & ATTENDANCE PROGRAM (LEAP)

Added \$7 million to extend this program which is focused on disengaged and chronically absent students in targeted disadvantaged communities.



These 2022 improvements were made on top of the 2021 actions of more state funds for ECS; establishing a new Center for Literacy Research; adding more funds for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program; embracing minority teacher preparation programs in Alliance districts; authorizing significant school construction grants, and supporting the Connecticut State Department of Education's new K-12 Curriculum Guidelines.

In addition, local educators have undertaken several new shifts from traditional schooling, including dismantling inequity and unfairness in school policies and practices; creating schools that are safe and foster social and emotional health; developing school improvement plans; embracing innovation, and accelerating learning for all students.



Throughout the last three years, public officials, education leaders, and especially teachers have demonstrated a caring, thoughtful and successful response to the pandemic. Looking forward all of us must commit to making equity and student success our priorities. The future of our communities, State and country are at stake and dependent upon how well we invest in our public schools.

The most important step in the continuous improvement of the Connecticut public schools is to increase the State's share of total expenses and to continue to focus on equity and student success.

BLUEPRINT 2023

Connecticut's educational inequities and achievement gaps are well documented. Furthermore, COVID-19 has exacerbated the learning gaps and the digital divide, thereby putting Connecticut's neediest students in an even more precarious position.

The State of Connecticut has a legal and moral obligation to lead, appropriately fund, and support public schools. Only the state can counteract the influence of local wealth on determining educational expenditures and opportunities.

It is true that Connecticut has made some visible progress in its quest for more equitable school funding and in beginning to close its achievement gaps. However, no one should claim victory and rest on the policies of the past. There will always be more to do to improve our schools.

The 30 recommendations of the 2021 CAPSS Blueprint are both comprehensive and long-term, and would lead to the continuous improvement of public education in Connecticut. This 2023 version of the Blueprint collapses these 30 recommendations into four broad categories.

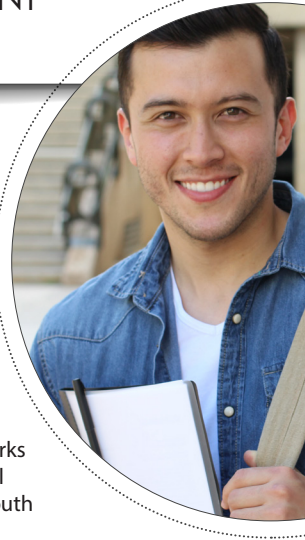
1. SUPPORTING THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

- a. The State government should make annual and continuous progress in raising the State's share of support for schools to be equal to local dollars received; predominantly through the ECS grant growing at a digestible/sensible/sustainable 2.5% per year, driven by wealth and educational need factors, with "no loss" provisions where appropriate; with a consideration of freezing formula data elements for a three-year period.
- b. The State's Special Education Excess Cost grant should be fully funded, adjusted for equity factors, and paid on a more timely basis.
- c. The State's School Construction grant should be increased to 10-80%, with stricter requirements and inclusive of air conditioning and clean air requirements.
- d. The State's five School Improvement Grants for Alliance Districts should be merged.
- e. Adult Basic Education should be regionalized; ESL programs should be tripled in state funding, with added technology; a State Transportation grant for overburden should be reinstated; universal access for three and four-year-olds in Alliance Districts should be incentivized in additional grants to local school districts; additional funding to the six RESCs to support "regionalism" and especially in special education and mental health.



2. EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, ACHIEVEMENT & INNOVATION

- f. The CSDE should provide K-12 curriculum guides and materials aligned with State Assessments; while statewide census testing should be reduced to grades 3, 5, and 7, 9, and 11 (PSAT & SAT – paid for by the state); virtual learning must be improved and evaluated.
- g. Attacking inequity and unfairness in policies, regulations, and practices that result in harmful discrimination among students and staff; analyzing graduation rates, special education identification, advanced courses, discipline rates, and more by race/ethnicity, handicap, gender, etc.
- h. New state aid is needed to support student health and safety, mental health, and trauma services must reach expanded networks of regional providers; greater coordination of state-regional-local resources is needed to reach disengaged and disenfranchised youth focused on high school completion and career pathways.
- i. Eliminating the barriers to teacher certification is key to addressing the current and future shortage of teachers; additionally, minority teacher recruitment, teacher evaluation, and professional development must become more locally determined, flexible and innovative.



3. INTERGOVERNMENTAL MATTERS

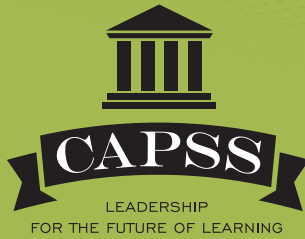
- j. The Federal government must begin funding Special Education more seriously and must reduce its nightmare of requirements across all federal programs; State grants to towns (for non-education) must not be reduced; Teacher retirement and healthcare must be fully funded and sustainable; State and local debt and obligations must be honestly addressed; small State grants for one-town or one program should be eliminated, and a minimum expenditure requirement should be reinstated.

4. MORE RESEARCH & STUDY NEEDED

- k. Much more work needs to be done on: the disparity in per-pupil expenditures (among districts); the growth of special education identification rates and costs; the most efficient and successful programs for English learners; achieving a greater level of equity in funding magnet and charter schools; and an annual reporting of progress in reducing inequalities and disparities in expenditures, programs, and achievements.

The State of Connecticut cannot and will not reduce inequities in its school funding system unless it significantly increases state aid as a percentage of all revenues dedicated to public schools.

Furthermore, all schools should engage in the relentless pursuit of EACH CHILD becoming a successful reader by the end of first grade.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT

Frances Rabinowitz

Executive Director

frabinowitz@capss.org

(860) 236-8640, ext. 160

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WWW.CAPSS.ORG