**DRAFT Report of the ACIR Education Subcommittee: A Focus on Three Key Pillars**

**A. Changes in School Governance - It's time to innovate**

The ACIR Education Subcommittee recommends the state adopt flexible options for school governance that retain local accountability and control of school performance and finances while realizing the potential efficiencies that come from regional cooperation.

Currently Connecticut only recognizes local school districts, regional school districts and charter schools as Local Education Agencies (LEAs).

Regional school districts as defined in statute are permanent arrangements and require voters to give up a great deal of fiscal control and autonomy. Towns can only leave a regional district if permission is granted by the partnering town or towns and budget development takes place completely outside the regular municipal budgeting process. Additionally, all local fiscal controls are taken away from member communities when a regional school district is formed. Due to constitutional apportionment rules, the smaller communities in a regional school district have a smaller weighted vote or less members on a regional Board of Education.

Given this, it is unlikely that voters would approve a plan that gives up so much autonomy. However, there are ways to achieve many of the regional benefits without formally regionalizing by expanding cooperative agreements as defined in 10-158(a):

1. **Empower towns to establish cooperative schools and have those schools recognized as LEAs.**a. Provide districts with a wider array of governance options that would successfully address the typical challenges that cause towns and districts to back away or not consider regionalization. For example, expand the definition of what a school district is. Give towns the authority to create flexible cooperative agreements under 10-158(a) and recognize such agreements as a school district. This keeps the local boards of education intact (although they could be made smaller), maintains local fiscal controls and autonomy, and gives all towns in the partnership an equal voice as to the direction of their school district. If circumstances change, the partners will have the flexibility to adjust — something they do not have the authority to do in a traditional regional school district as defined by the state. Because the local LEA interfaces with the federal government for performance reporting and grants, the LEA agreement will be in effect for at least three years following adoption. Per statute, teachers and administrators maintain their years of service when moved into a cooperative agreement, additional legislation should be drafted to allow them to keep years of service when moved out. The provision of a framework that districts and schools may utilize to construct relationships to improve programming and services among various LEAs without requiring such regional efforts, would support the committee’s interest to replicate and scale this work.

 b. Waive existing education space standards when renovating facilities for regionalized or cooperative programs. This can facilitate the reuse of existing buildings and offer incentives such as increasing the construction reimbursement bonus to 20% for regionalized or jointly operated programs.

c. Enable existing regional districts to initiate studies for dissolution or reconstitution based on a majority vote of involved towns, rather than the currently required unanimous consent. Simplify the process for towns wishing to exit a regional arrangement to better reflect shifts in local needs.

d. Grant statutory authority for the establishment of regional finance boards for communities within regional school districts by region-wide majority vote to oversee regional school budgets, ensuring fair fiscal oversight while reducing redundancy.

**B. Special Education**

The Special Education section of our report is closely tied to the ongoing efforts of a separate Special Education Task Force, whose final recommendations we are awaiting. However, we have identified several priorities and ideas that we hope will be included in their final recommendations:

We also recognize the importance of treating special education students as a population that deserves equitable opportunities, rather than viewing them as fundamentally different from other students. Discussions in recent meetings have emphasized the need to create inclusive environments where all students, including those in special education, are valued and supported without stigmatization. By fostering a holistic view of education, we aim to move beyond labels and focus on individual needs and strengths, ensuring that special education services are integrated rather than isolated.

1. **Excess Cost Grant Incentives for Regional Collaboration**: We recommend incentivizing districts to build local special education programs to reduce outplacement, and leveraging regional service centers (RESCs) to increase capacity and quality of services across multiple towns. A key incentive would be to offer a lower excess cost threshold for local or regional programs and a higher threshold for out of district placements. The impact of Connecticut’s unique “burden of proof” laws during due process should be carefully examined.
2. **Early Intervention Investments:** Increased funding for early intervention programs is critical. Effective early interventions can significantly reduce the number of children who ultimately require formal special education. This includes better support for literacy, behavioral, and emotional needs in the early grades to address developmental issues before they necessitate special education classification. Towns should be incentivized to jointly operate these early childhood centers.
3. **Workforce Development in Special Education**: Recruitment of special education teachers must be enhanced through better financial incentives, improvements in respect and work conditions, and reducing paperwork to focus more on student interactions. Incentivizing students from diverse backgrounds, including those who may have benefited from special education services themselves, could help diversify and strengthen the workforce.Pathways to educator preparation in this area, and all areas, should be streamlined within the work the CSDE and The CT Educator Preparation and Certification Board are doing and plan to do moving forward.

**C. Workforce Development**

Similarly, our Workforce Development recommendations are awaiting input from a specialized task force on workforce-related issues. However, key considerations in our discussions are outlined as follows:

1. **Improving Teacher Retention and Support**: A focus on reducing administrative burdens, increasing teacher autonomy, and providing robust professional development opportunities is critical. Teachers need sufficient support to grow professionally while avoiding burnout, which is a major cause of workforce attrition. Additionally, highly specialized teachers involved in cooperative agreements face challenges if regional needs shift. They often find new employment but they can lose their tenure and years of service when starting in a new district.
2. **Regional Programs and Training Opportunities**: Regional efforts to share teacher training and mentoring resources should be encouraged, particularly in fields where there are significant workforce gaps, such as special education, STEM, and early childhood education. RESCs, district cooperation and educator preparatory programs should play roles in this work. and This is especially important as professional development mandates increase. Find means to scale the many educator preparation, cross endorsement and additional training programs being piloted by the State and others to enhance opportunities across the State and to deepen the educator pool.
3. **Vocational and Technical Skills for Students**: Schools must also focus on developing student skills for non-college pathways. Workforce readiness programs that emphasize technical skills, certifications, apprenticeships, and partnerships with local businesses should be expanded to align education with Connecticut’s economic needs. Post Secondary Entrance should be removed as one of the 11 metrics used in the Next Generation Accountability Standards as this disincentivizes creative pathways for students.
4. **Diversity in Education Workforce:** Recruitment and retention of teachers, especially from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds, must remain a priority. There needs to be a sustained focus on building pathways from high school to college to education certification, particularly for students of color and other marginalized groups. In addition, enhancements such as increased salaries and other benefits must be supported by the State to draw the best candidates to a declining pool of high school and undergraduate students interested in the profession.