

# **IX.B.**

## **Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford**

**To Be Proposed:**  
January 3, 2024

**Resolved**, That the State Board of Education, pursuant to Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes, approves the continued participation of West Side Middle School, Waterbury, in the Commissioner's Network for an additional and final year commencing July 1, 2024, and directs the Commissioner to take the necessary action, including, but not limited to, expending such funds as may be necessary to execute and implement the foregoing.

Approved by a vote of \_\_\_\_\_, this third day of January, Two Thousand Twenty-Four.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Secretary  
State Board of Education

**Connecticut State Board of Education  
Hartford**

**To:** State Board of Education

**From:** Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of Education

**Date:** January 3, 2024

**Subject:** Approval of Commissioner's Network Extension Year 5, West Side Middle School, Waterbury

*Executive Summary*

**Introduction**

Public Act 12-116, in part, established the Commissioner's Network to provide new resources, increased flexibilities, and greater accountability to improve student achievement in some of the state's lowest performing schools. The Commissioner's Network is a commitment between local stakeholders and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to improve student achievement in up to 25 schools. There are sixteen schools presently participating in the Commissioner's Network.

The purpose of the Commissioner's Network is to turn around chronically low-performing schools and improve outcomes for students who attend these schools. Commissioner's Network Turnaround Plans must include intensive and transformative strategies that are necessary to turn around schools that, to date, have been unsuccessful in their improvement efforts. These plans must reach beyond surface reforms to achieve dramatic and transformative outcomes, address past turnaround efforts, and provide an explanation as to how the proposed interventions will succeed where previous efforts have failed.

Schools are accepted into the Commissioner's Network for a minimum of three years. Subsection (h) of Section (§) 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) establishes that the State Board of Education (SBE) may allow schools to continue in the Commissioner's Network for up to two additional years if necessary. For the reasons set forth below, West Side Middle School (WSMS) in Waterbury is recommended to remain in the Commissioner's Network for an additional and final year.

**Background:**

West Side Middle School currently serves 817 students in grades six through eight. Eighty-one percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Twenty percent of the students are identified as needing special education services, and 21.2 percent are multilingual learners/English learners (MLs/ELs). Approximately 62.8 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 21.8 percent are Black, and 10 percent are White.

On April 5, 2019, the CSDE received an *Expression of Interest Form* from the Waterbury Public Schools (WPS), volunteering WSMS for participation in the Commissioner's Network. On May 23, 2019, the Commissioner of Education initially selected WSMS for possible participation in

the Commissioner's Network based on the following factors: (a) the district's expression of interest; and (b) the academic and developmental needs of the school's students and the capacity of the district to address those needs. The school was approved for one year of planning to develop a turnaround plan.

Following the initial selection, WSMS and the Waterbury Teachers Association appointed members to serve on the school's Turnaround Committee, and the CSDE conducted an Operations and Instructional Audit on September 26, 2019. The audit revealed primarily teacher-led lessons with low levels of rigor, differentiation, and student engagement. Concerns arose about the effectiveness of WSMS' professional learning along with implementation follow-through and feedback that is provided to teachers. In addition, the learning environment was not welcoming, with little student work or data displayed throughout the school and limited evidence of school branding. Classroom environments did not support collaboration and were devoid of supporting artifacts.

During the 2019-20 planning year, the school's Turnaround Committee developed the turnaround plan for WSMS in accordance with C.G.S. § 10-223h (d). The goal of the WSMS turnaround plan is to improve teaching and learning by implementing research-based, instructional best practices that have proven to be effective in increasing student performance. Specifically, WSMS targets Tier I instruction by teachers through the use of strategic and specific professional learning opportunities geared toward improving such instruction. Since joining the Commissioner's Network, WSMS has provided high quality professional learning for teachers and administrators to increase rigor and established what high-quality teaching and learning looks like. In addition to strengthening Tier I instruction, a tiered system of supports has been implemented.

Furthermore, to improve school climate, WSMS established Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative practices to help establish a common understanding and approach to the well-being of students. Efforts also focused on ensuring WSMS is inviting to students and families, including branding efforts that focus on positive messaging and high expectations. In addition, the daily schedule and school calendar have been redesigned to increase instructional time in mathematics for students and provide increased opportunities for professional learning.

On June 3, 2020, after their plan was approved by the SBE, WSMS officially entered the Commissioner's Network. As noted, schools are accepted into the Commissioner's Network for a period of three years, and pursuant to C.G.S. 10-223h(h), the SBE may allow such schools to continue in the Commissioner's Network for two additional years if necessary.

Since joining the Commissioner's Network, WSMS has been provided with varied supports by the CSDE. These supports include bi-weekly walkthrough visits by CSDE consultants with school and district leadership, the provision of professional learning sessions multiple times per year through a Netstat Learning Series, and the facilitation of Principal Roundtable discussions with other Commissioner's Network leaders. Additionally, technical support and planning meetings are provided around budget development and implementation, including necessary revisions. Finally, a mid-year audit is conducted each year to provide progress updates and recommendations tied to the approved turnaround plan.

Under the Commissioner's Network Grant, Waterbury Public Schools has shared the costs of a behavior counselor. The school and/or district have aligned funding and expenditures closely with school goals and student needs.

On May 3, 2023, the SBE approved an additional year for the continued participation of WSMS in the Commissioner's Network.

On October 5, 2023, SBE members Erin Benham, Elwood Exley, Jr., and Donald Harris joined the CSDE Turnaround Office on a site visit to West Side Middle School to observe its progress and engage in discussions around next steps.

### **Improvements:**

- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 3.4 percentage points in WSMS' performance index for English language arts (ELA), from an index of 64.1 in 2021-22 to 67.5 in 2022-23.
- The Next Generation Accountability Index Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 2.3 percentage points in WSMS' performance index for mathematics, from an index of 47.8 in 2021-22 to 50.1 in 2022-23.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 5.7 percentage points in WSMS' academic growth in ELA, from 50.1 in 2021-22 to 55.8 in 2022-23.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 2.6 percentage points in WSMS' academic growth in mathematics from an index of 41.9 in 2021-22 to 43.5 in 2022-23.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates that growth in the Progress Toward English Proficiency in literacy increased from 36.5 in 2021-22 to 44 in 2022-23. Similarly, the Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates that growth in the Progress Toward English Proficiency in mathematics increased from 39.8 in 2021-22 to 46.8 in 2022-23.

### **Continued Areas of Focus:**

- Continuing to focus on reducing chronic absenteeism through leveraging wraparound services and outreach efforts to families on the importance of regular school attendance.
- Providing high-quality instruction that is characterized by the design of rigorous/cognitively demanding and engaging lessons (Instructional Task and Design).
- Supporting teacher development and implementation of lessons that promote engagement and student-centered instruction. Identifying sustainable and coherent systems in support of the design and implementation of high-quality instruction.

## **Next Steps:**

During the 2024-25 school year, West Side Middle School will continue strategies that have shown steady improvement over the past four years, abandon those that have not, and target areas requiring further growth and development. The CSDE Turnaround Office will provide intensive monitoring and support as West Side Middle School enters Year 5 of the Commissioner's Network. The Year 5 plan will prioritize the following:

- Decreasing the chronic absenteeism rate through a multi-tiered systems approach. Attendance will continue to be monitored weekly through data and attendance team meetings. Members of the attendance team should participate in statewide trainings on the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) approach to supporting students struggling with absenteeism and disengagement.
- Building a Teacher Leadership Academy to support ongoing instructional practice improvements.
- Continuing to build the capacity of the school leadership team.
- Implementing lesson study across all departments to include collaborative lesson planning and video peer coaching.
- Continuing after-school programming to support student need with academics and social-emotional learning.

## **Recommendation:**

The CSDE recommends that the SBE approve an additional year commencing July 1, 2024.

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