

VIII.A.

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

To Be Proposed:

February 11, 2026

Resolved, That, pursuant to Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes, the State Board of Education approves the continued participation of Hamden Middle School, in Hamden, Connecticut in the Commissioner's Network for an additional and final year commencing July 1, 2026, 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 eleventh day of February, Two Thousand Twenty-Six.

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: February 11, 2026

Subject: Approval of Commissioner’s Network Extension for Hamden Middle School, Hamden

Executive Summary

Introduction

Public Act 12-116, now codified as Section (§) 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.), 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 14 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, although C.G.S.§ 10-223h(h) provides 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, Hamden Middle School (HMS) in Hamden is recommended to remain in the Commissioner’s Network for a fifth and final year.

Background

HMS currently serves 845 students in grades seven and eight. Forty-eight percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, 16 percent of the students are identified as needing special education services, and 10 percent are English learners/Multilingual learners (ELs/ MLs). Approximately 30 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 32 percent are Black, and 25 percent are White.

On April 14, 2021, the CSDE received an *Expression of Interest Form* from Hamden Public Schools (HPS), volunteering HMS for participation in the Commissioner's Network. On May 27, 2021, the Commissioner of Education initially selected HMS 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, HMS and the Hamden Federation of Teachers appointed members to serve on the school's Turnaround Committee, and the CSDE conducted an Operations and Instructional Audit on October 4, 2021. The audit revealed several challenges impeding success. The audit underscored the need for a stronger professional culture, as collaboration and understanding of effective instruction varied widely among staff. Classroom practices were predominately teacher-directed, with limited opportunities for student-to-student discourse and a reliance on low-level, recall-based questioning. Professional learning sessions appeared more reactive than proactive, with minimal engagement and limited focus on practical application. Planning time was not effectively used for data-driven instruction, and teachers expressed a desire for more collaborative opportunities. Student engagement was largely compliance-based, with lessons lacking the rigor necessary to address diverse student needs. Behavioral issues, driven by inconsistent implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS), frequently disrupted instructional time.

During the 2021-22 planning year, the school's Turnaround Committee developed the turnaround plan for HMS in accordance with C.G.S. §10-223h(d). The HMS Turnaround Plan prioritizes talent, academics, culture and climate, and operations to foster a thriving school environment. In the area of talent, HMS looks to gain collective teacher efficacy through professional learning that emphasizes Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), effective feedback, instructional rounds, and data teams while embedding targeted learning into weekly meetings and providing strong support for new staff. In the area of academics, HMS is committed to strengthening Tier 1 instruction through strategies that enhance engagement, rigor, and differentiation. Additionally, the school is developing a comprehensive continuum of academic interventions to support student success. For the area of culture and climate, the school looks to promote positive behavior using PBIS and restorative practices, enhance family and community engagement through targeted initiatives, and expand enrichment programming with diverse opportunities. In the area of operations, HMS looks to restructure the school schedule to maximize instructional time and collaboration, protect professional collaboration time, and develop a summer institute to deepen teacher expertise and improve instructional models, particularly for students with disabilities.

On June 1, 2022, after HMS's plan was approved by the SBE, the school 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, HMS 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 executive leadership coaching. 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, HPS has shared the cost for several key positions and initiatives at HMS. The grant supports 11 full-time positions, including two deans of students, six school climate advisors, two Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) coordinators, and one social studies instructional specialist. In addition, the grant funds stipends for an after-school program, 11 team leaders, a professional learning chair, and a newly established chair of faculty and staff. The grant also provides additional compensation for activities such as after-school academic programming, summer work sessions for the school leadership team, professional development planning and delivery, and the Saturday Service program.

Improvements

- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 demonstrates HMS’s overall Accountability Index increased by 5.7 percentage points, increasing from 49.5 percent in 2022-23 to 55.2 percent in 2024-25.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 also demonstrates an increase of 1.1 percentage points in HMS’s performance index in English Language Arts (ELA), from 59.1 percent in 2023-24 to 60.2 in 2024-25. The ELA performance index for high needs students improved by 0.3 percentage points, increasing from an index of 50.4 in 2023-24 to 50.7 in 2024-25.
- In mathematics, the Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 shows an increase of 0.6 percentage points in HMS’s performance index, from 54.3 in 2023-24 to 54.9 in 2024-25. The mathematics performance index for students identified with high needs also increased by 0.5 percentage points, from 45.3 percent in 2023-24 to 45.8 in 2024-25.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 demonstrates an increase of 1.1 percentage points in HMS’s Academic Growth in ELA, from 48.5 percent in 2023-24 to 49.6 percent in 2024-25. Similarly, the school demonstrated an increase of 3.5 percentage points in Academic Growth in Mathematics, from 49.7 percent in 2023-24 to 53.2 percent in 2024-25.
- HMS has adopted a comprehensive, schoolwide framework to enhance teaching and learning. Recent observational data from the Commissioner’s Network highlight that teachers consistently display clearly defined classroom learning targets and success criteria. Ongoing professional development initiatives have focused on optimizing the classroom learning environment by incorporating content-specific anchor charts, word walls, and PBIS materials to improve accessibility for all students. Additionally, professional learning sessions have emphasized strategies to strengthen student discourse and the use of Depth of Knowledge questioning to increase rigor and promote deeper student understanding.

- Curriculum and Instruction PLCs convene five times during each 14-day rotation and are facilitated by instructional specialists in the core content areas of ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies. These sessions are dedicated to aligning curriculum and instruction with unit standards and objectives, as well as collaboratively writing and refining unit plans. PLCs also focus on planning differentiated instructional materials and assessments. During these meetings, HMS staff analyze student data to adjust whole-group instruction, plan targeted small-group instruction, examine evidence-based instructional practices, and engage in coaching cycles to enhance instructional effectiveness.
- The PLC designs, organizes, and facilitates "Bite-Sized PD," a professional development initiative held once during each 14-day rotation. These sessions consist of targeted mini-workshops conducted throughout the day during PLC blocks and are designed to strengthen instructional practices for all staff.
- Chronic absenteeism has decreased by 2.8 percentage points. In 2023-24, 22.1 percent of HMS students were reported as chronically absent, compared to 19.3 percent in 2024-25. Chronic absenteeism among high-needs students declined by 1.8 percentage points, from 29.4 percent in 2023-24 to 27.6 percent in 2024-25.
- The percentage of students meeting fitness standards at HMS has significantly improved. The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 demonstrates HMS's percentage of students reaching fitness standards has improved by 20.4 percentage points over a two-year period, rising from 18.8 percent in 2022-23 to 39.2 percent in 2024-25.
- HMS has successfully introduced Dragon PRIDE Days on the half days scheduled in the school calendar. A total of 15 Dragon Pride days are scheduled for the 2024-25 school year. These days are dedicated for social-emotional learning and community building activities, helping to reduce instructional disruptions while fostering a stronger sense of community. This strategy has also contributed to improved student attendance on half days.
- Over the past several years, HMS has expanded opportunities for parent and family involvement. Key initiatives include strengthening outreach around the grade six to seven transition, increasing emphasis on the grade eight to nine transition, and continuing the use of social media to update parents and community members about school events.

Continued Areas of Focus

- Providing ongoing professional learning for administrators and teachers that strengthens collective teacher efficacy, with a focus on PLCs, actionable feedback, and embedding professional learning into weekly department and grade-level meetings.
- Strengthening onboarding and support for new HMS staff, including new teachers and staff who are new to the district, by assigning a clearly identified point of contact to address questions and offer coaching.
- Improving Tier 1 instruction by increasing rigor, strengthening differentiation, elevating student engagement, and ensuring regular checks for understanding.
- Ensuring task design is standards-aligned and promotes deeper thinking, reasoning, and sustained student cognitive engagement.
- Incorporating executive functioning skills into classroom instruction to support student independence and readiness for high school and postsecondary pathways.
- Developing and implementing a continuum of academic supports through the SRBI framework, including clearly defined processes, structures, and progress monitoring expectations.

- Addressing student behavior and school climate through consistent implementation of PBIS, expanding restorative practices, and using a tiered system of behavioral supports to reduce suspensions, which decreased from 21.7 percent in 2023–24 to 20.0 percent in 2024–25.
- Strengthening family engagement by enhancing new student orientation programs, building connections between elementary partners and HMS staff, and analyzing student and family survey data to inform engagement strategies.
- Expanding enrichment opportunities by increasing after-school programming, intramurals, athletics, clubs, and partnerships with community organizations.
- Continuing to refine the school schedule to maximize instructional time, expand intervention opportunities, and increase high-quality teacher collaboration within grade-level and content-area teams.

Next Steps

During the 2026-27 school year, HMS 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 HMS enters Year 5 of the Commissioner’s Network. The Year 5 plan will prioritize the following:

- Implement data-driven professional learning and coaching by leveraging walkthrough and PLC evidence to provide targeted, role-specific supports.
- Strengthen onboarding and mentorship systems to ensure instructional consistency, coherence, and continuity for new faculty and long-term substitutes.
- Institutionalize peer-to-peer learning through structured observations, shared instructional priorities and strategies, and reflection protocols to sustain high-quality instruction.
- Strengthen Tier 1 instruction by ensuring consistent use of clear learning targets, success criteria, and academic discourse routines across all content areas.
- Improve Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention effectiveness by increasing the frequency of data reviews and aligning supports to root causes and grade-level standards.
- Increase student engagement by expanding Building Thinking Classrooms practices and embedding student-led discussion and collaborative problem solving.
- Ensure consistent implementation of PBIS and Restorative Practices through standardized behavior expectations, reteaching routines, and reflection tools.
- Use behavior and attendance data to refine the continuum of supports, prioritizing proactive interventions for students with early-warning indicators.
- Expand family engagement through multilingual communication, needs-aligned events, and clear feedback loops to strengthen partnership and improve access.
- Maximize student access to enrichment, academic supports, and intervention opportunities through intentional and flexible scheduling structures.
- Strengthen core operational systems, including communication protocols, supervision plans, and transitions, to support efficient and predictable daily operations.
- Finalize and monitor a strategic advancement plan that aligns priorities, resources, and staffing to ensure long-term sustainability and continuous improvement.

Recommendation

The CSDE recommends that the SBE approve an additional and final year commencing July 1, 2026.

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