

# VIII.A.

## Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

### **To Be Proposed:**

March 4, 2026

**Resolved,** That, pursuant to Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes, the State Board of Education approves the continued participation of McDonough Middle School, Hartford, 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 fourth day of March, 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:** March 4, 2026

**Subject:** Approval of Commissioner’s Network Extension for McDonough Middle School, Hartford

***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, McDonough Middle School (MMS) in Hartford is recommended to remain in the Commissioner’s Network for a fifth year.

**Background**

MMS currently serves 316 students in grades six through eight. Eighty-one percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Twenty-eight percent of the students are identified as needing special education (SPED) services, and 41 percent are English learners/Multilingual learners (ELs/MLs). Approximately 3 percent are Asian, 81 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 10 percent are Black, and 5 percent are White. The current principal began her leadership at MMS in August of 2020.

On April 15, 2021, the CSDE received an *Expression of Interest Form* from Hartford Public Schools (HPS), volunteering MMS for participation in the Commissioner's Network.

On May 27, 2021, the Commissioner of Education initially selected MMS 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, MMS and the Hartford Federation of Teachers appointed members to serve on the school's Turnaround Committee, and the CSDE conducted an Operations and Instructional Audit on September 20, 2021. The audit identified several challenges impeding success, including low academic performance, high suspension rates, high teacher turnover, and a significantly high chronic absenteeism rate. Teaching effectiveness, pedagogy, and classroom management were notably deficient, as evidenced by low levels of rigor, a lack of differentiated teaching strategies, high levels of disengagement, and frequent disruptions in class. Instructional leadership was insufficient, and teachers did not receive consistent, actionable feedback. Additionally, the school lacked a fully functional school attendance team and established protocols; and student behavior posed a significant challenge, with little evidence of an effective behavior management system.

During the 2021-22 planning year, the school's Turnaround Committee developed the turnaround plan for MMS in accordance with C.G.S. §10-223h(d). The MMS Turnaround Plan focuses on implementing strong, differentiated Tier I instruction that holds students to high expectations while meeting their diverse needs in an inclusive, innovative, collaborative, engaging, and student-centered learning environment. This model emphasizes the use of targeted, job-embedded professional learning that prioritizes research-based strategies for special populations, focusing on differentiation, accommodations, modifications, second language acquisition, and sheltered instruction. It also emphasizes student-centered instructional practices that build students' competencies towards the Hartford Public Schools Portrait of a Graduate. These practices foster a culture of achievement and a commitment to continuous improvement through practitioner reflection and shared beliefs and collective efficacy. On June 1, 2022, after their plan was approved by the SBE, MMS 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, MMS 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.

## **Improvements**

- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 demonstrates an increase of 4.0 percentage points in MMS's performance index in English language arts (ELA), from 37.5 percent in 2023-24 to 41.5 percent in 2024-25. The ELA Performance Index – High-Needs Students improved by 4.2 percentage points, from an index of 37.0 percent in 2023-24 to 41.2 percent in 2024-25.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 demonstrates an increase of 3.1 percentage points in MMS's performance index in mathematics, from 29.5 percent in 2023-24 to 32.6 percent in 2024-25. The mathematics performance index for students identified with high needs improved by 3.2 percentage points, from 29.3 percent in 2023-24 to 32.5 percent in 2024-25.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 demonstrates an increase of 11.1 percentage points in MMS's academic growth in ELA, from 48.3 percent in 2023-24 to 59.4 in 2024-25. The ELA academic growth for students identified with high needs improved by 11.1 percentage points, from 48.1 percent in 2023-24 to 59.2 percent in 2024-25.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2024-25 demonstrates an increase of 4.3 percentage points in MMS's academic growth in mathematics, from 38.7 percent in 2023-24 to 43.0 in 2024-25. The mathematics academic growth for students identified with high needs improved by 4.2 percentage points, from 39.0 percent in 2023-24 to 43.2 percent in 2024-25.
- Chronic absenteeism has decreased by 10 percentage points. In the 2023-24 school year, 45.8 percent of MMS students were identified as chronically absent; this figure decreased to 35.8 percent.
- According to the 2024-25 MMS School Climate and Connectedness Survey, 91.7 percent of families reported having the information they need to support their child's learning, reflecting a 3.3 percent increase from the 2023-24 results. Additionally, 83.3 percent of staff report feeling supported in their role, an increase of 2.1 percent from the prior year.
- MMS has experienced a reduction in content-area teacher turnover in the past two years. The school's strategic recruitment and hiring practices, which emphasize attendance and behavior support, have contributed to the improved teacher retention rate, reduced suspensions, and decreased chronic absenteeism.
- Student survey results indicate strengthened adult-student relationships. In 2024-25, 86.4 percent of students reported there is a caring adult in the building, reflecting an increase of 5.0 percentage points from the 2023-24 school year.

## **Continued Areas of Focus**

- Strengthening the attendance system by advancing to a fully integrated early warning attendance framework that builds on the Twilight Team's Year 4 progress. This includes real-time monitoring dashboards, grade-level attendance micro-teams, expanded home-visiting protocols, multi-tiered mentoring supports (peer and adult mentors), and predictive triggers to ensure early intervention and sustained reductions in chronic absenteeism.
- Refining implementation of the McDonough Method Instructional Framework by embedding explicit Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 expectations into lesson planning, professional learning communities (PLCs), and instructional coaching cycles.

This work will move the framework from teacher implementation to schoolwide coherence and student ownership through learning goals, reflection cycles, and structured instructional rounds.

- Strengthening Tier 1 instruction and the continuum of services for ELs/MLs and students with disabilities by unifying supports across departments. This includes the expansion of co-teaching structures, development of Tier 1 Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Look-Fors, monthly ML/SPED instructional clinics, and the creation of shared progress-monitoring tools to ensure aligned planning and differentiated instructional practices across all classrooms. This work will continue through the SPED/ML task force and the expansion of the Intensive Learning Center.
- Advancing the enrichment framework to shift from collaboration time to high-impact, data-driven PLC cycles that generate measurable student outcomes. Enrichment blocks will support quarterly cross-disciplinary collaboration, aligned student work protocols, and flexible regrouping based on data every four weeks. Reading and mathematics enrichment will be implemented to increase student proficiency in both areas.
- Expanding the role and impact of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) by transitioning from system management to system leadership. The ILT will lead quarterly deep-dive analyses of Tier 1–3 implementation, deliver micro-responsive professional learning aligned to instructional priorities, calibrate walkthrough tools, and ensure resource alignment tied to student performance trends.
- Increasing the reach and effectiveness of Power Hour and the Virtual Academy by aligning enrollment and supports to student-level data. Power Hour will include targeted intervention and acceleration groups, high-dosage tutoring, and EL/ML-specific academic supports. The Virtual Academy will incorporate bilingual scaffolds, vocabulary supports, culturally relevant content, and structured progress monitoring. Language-learning classes for families and staff will continue.
- Enhancing student-to-student mentoring opportunities by establishing a structured check-in/check-out (CICO) student mentor leadership cohort trained in social-emotional learning and restorative practices. Mentors will track mentee progress across attendance, behavior, and engagement indicators, strengthening a peer-support model aligned with positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).

### **Next Steps**

During the 2026–27 school year, MMS will continue strategies that have demonstrated 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 MMS enters Year 5 of the Commissioner’s Network. The Year 5 plan will prioritize the following:

- Strengthen staff stability through targeted recruitment, retention, and onboarding aligned to the McDonough Method Instructional Framework.
- Expand co-teaching partnerships and provide ongoing professional learning to strengthen instruction for ELs/MLs and students with disabilities (SWD).
- Deepen coaching cycles to increase consistency and quality of Tier 1 instructional practice.
- Strengthen Tier 1 rigor by improving task design, questioning strategies, and integrated instructional planning across all content areas.

- Expand the use of academic scaffolds for ELs/MLs and SWDs and monitor their impact more systematically.
- Align Power Hour and Virtual Academy supports more tightly to student performance and credit attainment needs.
- Enhance the coordinated attendance system with earlier outreach, strengthened mentoring, and improved communication with families.
- Reinforce Tier 1 behavior expectations and progress monitoring to stabilize routines and reduce behavior-related disruptions.
- Increase connections between students and trusted adults to improve engagement and belonging.
- Improve scheduling and resource allocation to support co-teaching, intervention blocks, and consistent collaborative planning time.
- Refine progress-monitoring routines and data systems to ensure timely adjustments in academic and attendance supports.
- Continue leveraging Commissioner’s Network resources to sustain high-impact structures and intentionally build sustainability within core systems and staff capacity as this final Commissioner’s Network year concludes.

**Recommendation**

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

Prepared by:

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Approved by:

Dr. Melissa Jenkins, Chief Turnaround Officer