

IX.C.

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

To Be Proposed:

April 3, 2024

Resolved, That, pursuant to Section 10-223h of the Connecticut General Statutes, the State Board of Education approves the continued participation of Wilby High School, Waterbury, in the Commissioner's Network for an additional 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 April, 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: April 3, 2024

Subject: Approval of Commissioner’s Network Extension for Wilby High School,
Waterbury

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 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. C.G.S. §10-223(h) 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, Wilby High School (WHS) in Waterbury is recommended to remain in the Commissioner’s Network for an additional year.

Background:

WHS currently serves 1,270 students in grades nine through twelve. Eighty percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Thirty-five percent of the students are identified as needing special education services, and 17 percent are Multilingual learners/English learners (MLs/ELs). Approximately 64 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 25 percent are Black, and 6 percent are White.

On April 13, 2020, the CSDE received an *Expression of Interest Form* from the Waterbury Public Schools (WPS), volunteering WHS for participation in the Commissioner's Network. On June 5, 2020, the Commissioner of Education initially selected WHS 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, WHS 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 October 7th and 8th, 2020. The audit revealed primarily teacher-led lessons with low levels of rigor, differentiation, and student engagement. Concerns arose about the lack of a common schoolwide understanding of what rigorous instruction looks like. Response to behavior was more reactive than proactive, and data were not used systematically to inform instruction and schoolwide improvement planning. In addition, the learning environment was not welcoming or stimulating.

During the 2020-21 planning year, the school's Turnaround Committee developed the turnaround plan for WHS in accordance with C.G.S. Section (§)10-223h(d). The goal of the WHS Turnaround Plan is to build upon the work that has been done during the Commissioner's Network planning year to strengthen the instructional leadership structures and practices. This will assist in teacher retention at WHS as well as improve instructional practices to deliver instruction that is appropriately standards-based and differentiated. In academics, the Turnaround Plan centers around increasing academic rigor, student engagement, and differentiation to dramatically improve student academic performance. Investments in improving the culture and climate of WHS include increased family and community engagement, partnerships, and wraparound services, as well as an effort to improve the school environment with a targeted focus on reducing the high chronic absenteeism rate. Finally, WHS will adjust the school schedule to further integrate opportunities for academic support and enrichment.

On May 5, 2021, after their plan was approved by the SBE, WHS 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, WHS 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, WPS has shared the costs of three teachers for the ninth-grade small learning community and two attendance counselors. The school and/or district have aligned funding and expenditures closely with school goals and student needs.

October 5, 2023, SBE members Erin Benham, Elwood Exley, Jr., and Donald Harris joined the CSDE Turnaround Office on a site visit to WHS to observe the school's progress and engage in discussions around next steps.

Improvements:

- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates an increase of 7.4 percentage points in the Preparation for College and Career Readiness (CCR) - Percent Taking Courses indicator, from 87.7 percent in 2021-22 to 95.1 percent in 2022-23.
- The Next Generation Accountability Report for 2022-23 demonstrates a decrease of 28.5 percentage points in the chronic absenteeism rate, from 68.8 percent in 2021-22 to 40.3 percent in 2022-23.
- Reintroduction of a ninth-grade academy comprised of three dedicated teams of teachers that allow for smaller class sizes with collaborative time for data review and student support, contributing to an increase of 4 percentage points in the student first-time pass rate from 81 percent in 2021-22 to 85 percent in 2022-23.
- Improvement of WHS' Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rate which exceeded the high school's 2022-23 FAFSA completion goal of 37 percent, with a 44 percent completion rate by June 2023.
- The number of students who applied to a two-year college increased by 3 percentage points, from 87 percent in 2021-22 to 90 percent in 2022-23. The percentage of students who applied to a four-year college increased by 8 percent, from 52 percent in 2021-22 to 60 percent in 2022-23.
- A developed and implemented common instructional framework that provides a cohesive structure consisting of research-based practices and is adaptable to work with various teaching styles, content areas, and student needs.
- The hiring of behavior technicians and behavior counselors who work closely with students referred to the early intervention program and provide support services for students, such as daily check-in/check-out, group talking circle sessions, and student mediation. Proactive measures with all off-task behavior have allowed an increased focus on rigor.

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. Expansion of attendance structures includes increasing relational home visits focused on building a relationship with the family.
- Strengthening academic rigor through high-quality instructional task design in all classrooms and providing professional learning that is focused on instructional planning, coaching, and data-driven decision-making.
- Monitoring the implementation of professional learning and job-embedded coaching through weekly walkthroughs.
- Increasing the capacity of department heads to support teacher growth and development through coaching and ongoing calibration of classroom observation feedback. There is a focus on effectively communicating verbal and written feedback to teachers.

- Embedding PSAT and SAT skills, questions, and materials throughout all departments to improve student performance.

Next Steps:

During the 2024-25 school year, WHS will continue strategies that have led to improvement over the past three 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 WHS enters Year 4 of the Commissioner’s Network. The Year 4 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 continue to participate in statewide training on the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) approach to support students struggling with absenteeism and disengagement.
- Providing ongoing professional learning based on staff needs and establishing an instructional practice video library for in-house staff to showcase best practices.
- Continuing afterschool programming to support student needs with academics and social-emotional learning.
- Promoting student engagement through high-yield instructional strategies and student-centered instruction.

Recommendation:

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

Prepared by:

Iris White, Education Consultant, Turnaround Office

Reviewed by:

Jennifer Webb, Bureau Chief, Turnaround Office

Approved by:

Irene E. Parisi, Chief Academic Officer