Connecticut State Board of Education
Hartford

Accountability and Support Committee

Wednesday, November 12, 2025
450 Columbus Blvd
Plaza North, Hearing Room B
Hartford, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes
Approved on: December 10, 2025

I. Call to Order

Pursuant to the notice filed with the Secretary of the State, Committee Chairperson Erin D. Benham, called the meeting to order at 3:30 p.m.

Committee Members Present:

Erin D. Benham
Donald F. Harris, Jr.
Kristen A. Record
Dr. Seth D. Zimmerman

CSDE Staff Present:

Dr. Melissa Jenkins
Jennifer Webb
Dr. Leah Champ Burdick
Amanda Baksa
Ruby Rodriguez

Guests Present:

- Melinda Smith, Superintendent, Thompson Public Schools
- Lindsey Calarco, Literary Coordinator, Thompson Public Schools
- Patty Chenail, Math Coordinator, Thompson Public Schools
- Dr. Darren Schwartz, Superintendent, West Side Middle School, Waterbury
- Peter McCasland, Principal, West Side Middle School, Waterbury
- Robert Haxhi, Education Liaison from Mayor's Office, Waterbury
- Dr. Charles Britton, Superintendent, Gildersleeve School, Portland
- Tracey Graff, Principal, Gildersleeve, Portland
- Ryan Walstrom, Current Principal of Valley View School, Past Principal of Gildersleeve, Portland

II. Approval of Minutes

Harris, Jr. moved, and Zimmerman seconded, that the Committee approves the minutes of June 18, 2025, Accountability and Support Committee meeting.

Vote:

In Favor:	Harris, Jr., Zimmerman, and Record
Abstained:	0
Opposed:	0
Absent:	Benham

Harris, Jr. moved, and Record seconded, that the Committee approves the minutes of September 10, 2025, Accountability and Support Committee meeting.

Vote:

In Favor:	Harris, Jr., Record, Benham, and Zimmerman
Abstained:	0
Opposed:	0
Absent:	0

III. Turnaround Schools and District Spotlight:

Chair Benham recognized the agenda item and opened the meeting to Dr. Melissa Jenkins, Chief Turnaround Officer. Dr. Jenkins noted that accountability is not solely about identifying deficiencies but also about celebrating success. She introduced Jennifer Webb, Bureau Chief of the Turnaround Office, to present the Turnaround School and District Spotlight success stories representing a unique yet connected journey of continuous improvement through collaboration, investment in people, and evidence-based instructional practices.

The spotlight presentations featured Thompson Public Schools district, West Side Middle School in Waterbury, and Gildersleeve School in Portland. Each school shared how they have strengthened instructional systems, improved student outcomes, and sustained progress through partnership with the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE).

Thompson Public Schools

Ms. Webb introduced Thompson Public Schools, an Opportunity District since 2022. Under the leadership of Superintendent Melinda Smith, Thompson has built impressive coherence across its instructional systems, particularly in literacy, mathematics, and data-driven decision making.

Superintendent Melinda Smith provided context, explaining that despite periods of inconsistent funding, the district made significant operational improvements. When Thompson became an Opportunity District in 2022, rather than viewing it as punitive, the district embraced it as an opportunity to leverage support from CSDE. She expressed deep gratitude to Dr. Jenkins and the Turnaround team

Lindsey Calarco, Literacy Coordinator, and Patty Chenail, Math Coordinator, presented data demonstrating significant academic gains through high dosage tutoring in mathematics and structured literacy implementation. In Grade 6, 58 percent of tutored students achieved greater than 110 percent of their growth target. In literacy, the district's first structured literacy cohort showed exceptional results, with 82 percent of first graders reaching proficient levels on DIBELS assessments. Both coordinators highlighted how access to real-time data through shared platforms and weekly data team meetings has transformed instructional conversations from deficit-based to improvement-focused, emphasizing how instructional practices, not just test scores, can drive student learning.

The district has invested significantly in career pathway development at its small comprehensive high school of 166 students, establishing 14 career pathways including Certified Nursing Associate (CNA), Emergency Medical Responder (EMR), welding, ServSaf, and OSHA certifications. Students are being hired directly by Electric Boat, and the district plans to expand its welding program to include an adult evening training center.

Committee members acknowledged the impressive work, particularly the dramatic reduction in chronic absenteeism and the comprehensive career pathway menu. Chair Benham suggested Thompson should share its model more broadly as other districts develop similar programs.

West Side Middle School, Waterbury

Ms. Webb introduced West Side Middle School in Waterbury, a Cohort 9 Commissioner's Network (CN) school that successfully exited turnaround status last year and is now recognized as a Category 3 school. Over five years, the school demonstrated steady growth across every indicator.

Superintendent Dr. Darren Schwartz emphasized that the Turnaround Office and CN have had the most significant impact he has seen in his 23 years as an educator in Connecticut. He also commended Principal Peter McCasland's leadership, describing the school's transformation as one grounded in collaboration, persistence, and a culture of learning, He emphasized that Waterbury's three turnaround middle schools, West Side, Wallace, and North End, have all exited turnaround status, a reflection of both district and state investment in sustained improvement.

Key improvements included chronic absenteeism decreasing from 60.1 percent in 2021-22 to 25.9 percent in 2024-25, and out-of-school suspensions decreasing from 1,131 to 321 students. West Side Middle School attributes these reductions to improved Tier 1 instruction, restorative practices, and implementation of tools including ParentSquare communication, Yondr pouches for electronic devices, HALO detection systems to deter vaping, and half-day Wednesdays for teacher professional learning.

Principal McCasland described the school's adoption of Harvard's instructional core framework, emphasizing alignment between students, teachers, and content to increase engagement and rigor. In mathematics, the Building Thinking Classrooms (BTC) model has supported active problem-solving and group-based learning, which has improved student engagement and outcomes.

Committee members commended West Side's progress and highlighting its clear evidence of sustained turnaround and strong teacher leadership. Vice Chairperson Benham recognized Waterbury's transformation as a model for how State partnerships can lead to lasting results. She noted how intentional leadership and continuous professional learning can improve student outcomes and school climate.

Gildersleeve School, Portland

Ms. Webb introduced Gildersleeve School in Portland as "our success story" that moved from a Level 4 Focus School in 2016 to a Level 1 School of Distinction in 2025, earning Blue Ribbon recognition from the State of Connecticut.

Superintendent Dr. Charles Britton noted that while Portland faced significant budget constraints, the School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding over three years was instrumental in providing training and staffing needed for transformation.

Tracey Graf, Principal of Gildersleeve School and Ryan Walstrom, Current Principal of Valley View School, Past Principal of Gildersleeve School, described the school's improvement philisophy: 'Getting the right people, doing the right thing, in the right way.' The SIG enabled critical staffing additions, including an additional reading specialist position. The school implemented Professional Learning Community (PLC) transformation, strengthened Multi- Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), added Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a dedicated special, and maintained intensive attendance monitoring.

The PLC process set clear parameters while preserving teacher autonomy. Teachers were expected to meet in Professional Learning Teams (PLT) one to three times weekly, focus on four essential questions, work within the identified priority standards, and show data accountability. Within these parameters, teachers had professional independence to discuss instructional strategies.

Superintendent Britton made one recommendation for future grants: consider following the student cohorts with resources as they progress through school, as the students who triggered Gildersleeve's Focus School designation moved onto middle school while SIG resources stayed at the elementary level.

The Committee members congratulated the Portland team for achieving one of the State's highest honors and praised their ability to maintain improvement after federal funding ended. Members noted that the school's approach, "the right people doing the right things in the right way" is a clear example of leadership-driven success.

IV. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 5:04 p.m. The next meeting will be on December 10, 2025.

Prepared by: Ruby Rodriguez