

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

Accountability and Support Committee

Wednesday, December 10, 2025

450 Columbus Blvd
Plaza North, Hearing Room B
Hartford, Connecticut

**Draft Meeting Minutes
(Approved on: _____)**

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
Dr. Charles Hewes
Felicia Canty
Anika Matin
Shakira Jacobs-Vazquez
Jennifer Webb
Ruby Rodriguez

Guests Present:

- Dr. Troy A. Monroe, CEO/Superintendent, Jumoke Academy, Hartford
- Dr. Marie Gordon-Hall, Chief Academic Officer, Jumoke Academy, Hartford
- Ana Marcil, Human Resources Manager, Jumoke Academy, Hartford
- Sharron Solomon-McCarthy, Director of Student Support Services, Jumoke Academy, Hartford
- Collette Fearon, Interim Director, New Beginnings Family Academy, Bridgeport
- Heidi Barker, Culture and Climate Specialist, New Beginnings Family Academy, Bridgeport
- Che Dawson, Executive Director/Principal, Highville Charter School, New Haven

II. Approval of Minutes

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

Vote:

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

III. Charter Schools Renewal Corrective Action Update:

Jumoke Academy, Hartford

Dr. Melissa Jenkins introduced the presentation from Jumoke Academy. Dr. Jenkins noted that for the 2026-26 school year, Jumoke Academy has been identified as a Turnaround school, placing it among the state's lowest-performing five percent of schools. Jumoke Academy presented an update on its progress toward meeting the conditions of its charter renewal and addressing its newly assigned Turnaround designation. The school currently serves 571 students across three campuses and has been required to improve chronic absenteeism rates, academic achievement and growth in ELA and mathematics, and staff certification levels. In response to the Turnaround designation, Dr. Monroe, the Superintendent, and his leadership team proactively reached out to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to request information, review corrective action plan strategies, and identify targeted areas where CSDE support could strengthen implementation. The team has also remained responsive to parent concerns while seeking state-level guidance.

Dr. Monroe emphasized that despite significant organizational challenges, including high levels of new staff, turnover within campus leadership, and a 50 percent change in board membership. He provided additional context, explaining that approximately 70.4 percent of staff across all Jumoke campuses are classified as new, which is defined as one to three years with the organization. In addition, two-thirds of campus leadership is new, with one principal completing

one year, a second principal in their first year, and a third principal recently returning from leave. Despite these transitions, the school continues to prioritize capacity-building through ongoing professional development, biweekly instructional leadership team meetings, strategic engagement and enrollment initiatives, board development, parent engagement, and community partnerships.

The academic team reported progress in several areas while acknowledging ongoing gaps. Dr. Gordon-Hall, Chief Academic Officer, described efforts to improve instructional quality across all campuses by aligning professional development to the corrective action plan and focusing on AVID WICOR strategies and the Explore, Engage, Elevate framework. Teachers receive explicit instruction training, coaching, modeling, and structured PLC time. Increased monitoring through regular walkthroughs, data meetings, and cross-campus collaboration has strengthened instructional coherence. Early assessment data showed notable bright spots in kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 3, where proficiency rates approached or surpassed district targets. However, results remain below the 35 percent benchmark across most grade levels, with Grade 6 performance particularly concerning. Leadership coaching and increased instructional support, especially at the middle school, are being used to address these gaps and ensure corrective action priorities are executed with fidelity.

Chronic absenteeism remains a central challenge, though the school has made measurable progress. Ms. Solomon-McCarthy, Director of Student Support Services, reported a slight improvement in chronic absenteeism from October 2024 to October 2025, alongside stronger communication, and engagement systems. Kindergarten and Grade 1 emerged as the most concerning subgroups, largely due to family-level barriers such as transportation issues, unstable housing, and the needs of families with multiple young children. The school has implemented layered engagement strategies, including weekly communication, parent meetings, staff memos, professional learning, attendance incentives, and partnerships with 211 and CCCI for wraparound services. The Academy aims to reduce chronic absenteeism by nine percentage points this school year, and current trends suggest it is on track.

Human resources updates highlighted substantial improvement in staff certification compliance. Ms. Marcil, Human Resources Manager, reported that certification rates have risen to 87 percent, with remaining staff in various stages of testing, approval, or application review. Although recruitment and retention remain difficult due to labor market competition and certification barriers, the school has hired 15 new teaching staff since the start of the year and continues to invest in mentoring, professional development, and pathways to certification through a “Grow Our Own” program. Overall staff retention stands at 79 percent. The Committee raised concerns about the experience level of teachers and the quality of TEAM mentors. Dr. Monroe confirmed that while most certified staff have one to five years of experience, the district employs an experienced former principal as TEAM coordinator, supported by additional certified teachers serving as mentors.

The Committee members also asked about leadership turnover, board composition, and continued absenteeism concerns. Dr. Monroe clarified that leadership changes were strategic and aimed at

strengthening district-level capacity, with additional support placed in the middle school. Board turnover resulted from term limits, prompting an active recruitment push that brought on new members with diverse expertise. Chronic absenteeism trends in the lower grades were attributed to family-level challenges requiring sustained wraparound support. The Committee recommended that principals attend future updates to provide firsthand insight into shifts in practice and the progress occurring at individual campuses. Dr. Monroe agreed, and the Committee concluded by thanking the team and noting its interest in future status reports.

New Beginnings Family Academy, Bridgeport

Dr. Jenkins introduced Collette Fearon, Interim Executive Director of New Beginnings Family Academy, and Heidi Barker, Culture and Climate Specialist. New Beginnings provided an update as outlined in their charter renewal corrective actions for the year, which revolve around attendance, English Language Arts, and mathematics.

New Beginnings opened in 1999 and serves Grades Pre-K through six students. In May 2025, they received a three-year charter renewal. Ms. Fearon provided an overview of current data from interim benchmark assessments and how they have launched strategies for their corrective action plan.

Ms. Fearon provided context regarding significant leadership changes at New Beginnings Family Academy since Spring 2025. They have navigated significant leadership transitions, including the departure of its Executive Director, Chief Academic Officer, and Development Officer. Despite these shifts, the school has experienced organizational stability due to its deeply experienced internal leadership team, which has maintained momentum around academic and operational priorities. Enrollment continues to grow, and the addition of new teachers reflects school expansion rather than staff attrition.

In the area of English Language Arts, the school outlined ambitious long-term goals aligned with the state's attainment targets, along with a short-term objective of increasing schoolwide reading proficiency from 40 percent to 65 percent this year based on i-Ready assessments. Leaders emphasized a strong commitment to evidence-based reading instruction rooted in the science of reading. This includes ongoing professional development, embedded coaching, a new walkthrough tool aligned with core curriculum materials, and a partnership with TNTP to enhance instructional leadership capacity. Foundational literacy skills have been a particular focus; the school piloted a new phonics program, "UFLI (University of Florida Literacy Institute)," in kindergarten with promising outcomes, and launched a schoolwide skill-based grouping model called "Walk to Read" to better target instruction. Weekly PLCs now operate with strengthened structures and protocols, allowing teachers to analyze data, plan effectively, and implement targeted improvement strategies. Early indicators show positive momentum, with internal walkthroughs reflecting stronger alignment to science-of-reading practices and DIBELS beginning-of-year data rising to 40 percent at grade level, an increase from previous years.

Ms. Fearon goes on to discuss New Beginnings Family Academy's ongoing efforts to strengthen mathematic instruction. It's acknowledged that the longstanding challenges, including a persistent decline in math performance in grades 2 and higher, compounded by the absence of a sustained math coach for six years. Teachers have reported difficulty navigating the complexity of the Bridges math curriculum, prompting the school to adopt a multi-pronged improvement strategy. This includes engaging an external math consultant to provide full-day professional development, coaching cycles, and modeling; hiring two Chief Academic Officers, one dedicated solely to mathematics, science, and IT; piloting the Illustrative Math curriculum; and developing new walkthrough tools, internalization protocols, and feedback systems. New Beginnings Family Academy's short-term math goal is to raise universal screener proficiency from 48.9 percent to 67 percent by June 2026, with a longer-term aim of improving SBA outcomes from 15.3 percent to 17.8 percent. Although performance remains low, SBA math results have shown slow and steady improvement over multiple years, increasing by 6.4 percentage points over the last two testing cycles.

Before turning the attendance portion over to Ms. Heidi Barker, Ms. Fearon noted pride in standing before the Committee to report that this time last year, chronic absenteeism was in the 40th percentile, and currently in October it is at 20.8 percent.

Ms. Barker provided additional updates pertaining to attendance. Chronic absenteeism improved across all student groups, including students with disabilities and multilingual learners, both of which saw significant reductions in chronic absence and attendance increases to above 94 percent. The school attributes these gains to a highly structured attendance system, including twice-weekly attendance team meeting schedule, a clearly defined tiered support framework, daily outreach to families, 10-day data cycles, and robust communication strategies. Attendance lessons are provided in all classrooms, and incentives such as spirit weeks and mascot-led celebrations are used to reinforce positive habits. Leaders emphasized that the improvements are the results of intentional visibility, relational engagement, and the consistent "showing up" of staff members across the school community.

The Committee members thanked the New Beginnings Family Academy for a comprehensive presentation and expressed appreciation for the clear evidence of improvement, particularly in attendance. The Committee asked questions about the sustainability of math support and encouraged the school to consider leveraging internal teacher expertise in addition to external consultants. Committee members also inquired about the school's previous attempt at subject departmentalization; the school explained that while they tried the model during earlier years, it was ultimately developmentally misaligned with student needs and created more instructional disruption than benefit. Additionally, the Committee suggested exploring the Question Formulation Technique to advance ELA questioning practices. School leaders expressed openness to all suggestions and reiterated their commitment to continued improvement. The Committee concluded by thanking the team and expressing interest in receiving future updates.

Dr. Seth Zimmerman left the meeting at 4:30 p.m.

Highville Charter School, New Haven

Dr. Jenkins introduced Mr. Che Dawson, Executive Director/Principal of Highville Charter School, who provided an in-depth update on its implementation of the corrective action plan, focusing on academic achievement, attendance, and staff certification. Mr. Dawson opened by acknowledging that while the school has demonstrated improvement in its accountability index and has made progress in both ELA and mathematics, the pace of progress is slower than desired. Mr. Dawson presented several years of accountability and assessment data, explaining that Highville evaluates performance through both proficiency and growth on the SBAC as well as internal NWEA assessments. Although proficiency gains have been modest, the school has shown strong growth compared to other New Haven schools, with nine of the thirteen tested grades exceeding their projected NWEA RIT growth targets, which is an improvement that Mr. Dawson described as significant given the school's starting point.

Reflecting on what has driven these improvements, he emphasized the impact of teacher retention, targeted professional development, student, and parent goal setting, and celebrating both growth and proficiency. Highville has also integrated standardized test scores into report cards to increase family awareness and accountability, expanded after-school tutoring for grades K-8, engaged in national math enrichment through Math Counts, and continued offering summer school to students who need additional support, even those who have not failed classes. These efforts, he noted, have contributed to a positive trajectory but also highlighted areas where the school continues to struggle. Challenges include supporting new teachers, addressing the needs of transient students who arrive below grade level, deepening teachers' skill in differentiating instruction, and strengthening conceptual understanding in mathematics.

To address these challenges, Highville is leveraging multiple strategies, including partnerships with state-provided support teams, dedicated "data days" for staff to analyze student performance, and consultation with NWEA and curriculum experts to maximize use of instructional materials. The school has also shifted its focus from solely supporting the lowest-performing students to targeting those just below proficiency, aiming to move more students into the proficient range. In math, Highville has implemented middle and high school interventions, including leveraging experienced elementary teachers to support older grades, which has already led to visible improvement.

Principal Dawson reported that chronic absenteeism has dropped and is now slightly below 20 percent, with most concerns concentrated in the lower grades. Strong school culture, consistent communication with families, rewards systems such as "Highville Bucks," and a new policy requiring students to make up days beyond the 10 percent absence threshold during the summer have contributed to better attendance.

Regarding staff certification, Highville has benefited from state support allowing teachers to remain employed while pursuing necessary credentials. The school is building a stronger certification pipeline by partnering with Teach Next Year and Relay Graduate School. A firm policy requires all teachers to show continuous progress toward certification, and while this has required difficult personnel decisions, it has also created a culture of accountability and support.

Principal Dawson raised concerns not on the corrective action plan but emerging as significant: an uptick in violent incidents and suspensions involving younger students, particularly in Grade 4, something Highville had never seen in previous years. He expressed deep concern about this trend and the correlation he is observing between increased behavioral challenges and lower academic performance. Highville is seeking additional guidance from CSDE and exploring strategies used in other New Haven schools.

He also highlighted that the effort invested across the school does not fully match the academic outcomes they are seeing, signaling potential inefficiencies in school systems. To address this, Highville has partnered with Bellwether to conduct a full school health assessment, with results expected before winter break.

During discussion, Committee members commended Principal Dawson for his transparency, proactive leadership, and willingness to diagnose root causes, particularly through the school health assessment. Members praised his decision to include standardized test scores on report cards, noting that this practice promotes clarity for families and helps identify students who may need advanced learning opportunities. They also discussed the importance of minimizing suspensions to keep students learning and encouraged Principal Dawson to share successful strategies that might inform broader policy work. The Committee thanked him for his detailed presentation and responsiveness throughout the process.

IV. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 5:16 p.m. The next meeting will be on January 7, 2026.

Prepared by: Ruby Rodriguez