

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

Accountability and Support Committee

Wednesday, January 7, 2026
450 Columbus Blvd
Plaza North, Meeting Room C & D
Hartford, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes
Approved on: February 4, 2026

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
Jennifer Webb
Amanda Baksa
Dr. Leah Champ Burdick
Ruby Rodriguez

Guests Present:

- Gary Highsmith, Superintendent, Hamden Public Schools
- Erin Bailey, Assistant Superintendent, Hamden Public Schools
- Scott Trauner, Principal, Hamden Middle School, Hamden
- Dr. Kondra Rattley, Deputy Superintendent, Hartford Public Schools
- Marjorie Rice, Principal, McDonough Middle School, Hartford
- William Conroy, Assistant Principal, McDonough Middle School, Hartford
- Monica Quinones, Executive Director of School Leadership, Hartford

II. Approval of Minutes

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

Vote:

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

SBE Accountability and Support Committee member, Kristen Record, arrived after the approval of minutes for the December 10, 2025, Accountability and Support Committee meeting.

III. Commissioner’s Network Schools Year 5 Extensions:

Ms. Webb opened the meeting explaining that both schools presenting today are requesting Year 5 extensions in the Commissioner’s Network. These extensions allow schools that have made meaningful progress but still need sustained support to address persistent challenges and ensuring sustainability. The presentations are grounded in mid-year audit evidence, trend data over multiple years, and implementation progress to demonstrate how each school has used the Commissioner’s Network model to strengthen systems and practices over time.

Hamden Middle School, Hamden

Ms. Webb introduced Hamden Middle School, noting Principal Scott Trauner, is in his first year, having walked into the Commissioner’s Network process. He is joined by Superintendent Gary Highsmith and Assistant Superintendent Erin Bailey. Hamden Middle School serves approximately 845 students with 9.8 percent multilingual learners, 16.6 percent students with disabilities, and almost 50 percent eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

The school has been a strong advocate for the Commissioner’s Network, fully embracing the model and using feedback as a tool for reflection and improvement rather than just compliance. They led one of the next steps sessions last year. The mid-year audit findings show steady year-over-year improvement across multiple domains, particularly in leadership practices, student engagement, and school climate. The areas for growth remain around systems for student behavior and attendance.

Principal Trauner went on to explain his two priorities, honoring the great work started three years ago and applying his twenty-two years at Hamden High School to middle school experience. Principal Trauner noted that he created a High School Readiness Team and staff have welcomed this secondary school culture emphasis. Key initiatives for the High School Readiness Team include improved articulation between middle and high school, training in the Dignity Index, Wednesday and Saturday academic support programs, emphasis on executive functioning skills including an executive functioning coach position, and shift to student-led conferences highlighting high school readiness and family engagement. The high school readiness focus is an overlay to the Commissioner's Network plan providing purpose and direction, not additional or conflicting work.

Based on data indicating that 90 percent of ninth-grade students identified as at risk of grade retention were families new to Hamden within the past three years and had demonstrated similar challenges in middle school, he established the New Student Monitoring and Support Team. This team is responsible for systematizing the onboarding process for students newly enrolled at Hamden Middle School through the implementation of research-based strategies that intentionally address families' initial engagement with the school.

Ms. Webb explains how Hamden Middle School audit scores over three years show growth with indicators moving from twos to threes. The Year 4 audit was recently completed, but the results were not shown as the Year 4 audit has not yet been finalized. Accountability data shows major jumps in areas like chronic absenteeism, earning 43 points versus zero when entering the network, physical fitness, earning 52 points versus zero, and overall movement in ELA and math. Science is a focus area due to a slight dip.

Superintendent Highsmith noted Principal Trauner's humility understates his rare K-12 administrative experience including elementary principal, assistant principal, and English teacher. Superintendent Highsmith goes on to express gratitude for both Principal Trauner and Assistant Superintendent Bailey. Over four years, the team has faithfully implemented the School Improvement Plan focusing on professional learning communities, Tier 1 instruction, interventions, and positive culture. Collaboration has been central, with use of learning targets and effective feedback now embraced across all eight elementary schools and the high school.

Year 5 will continue to strengthen teacher efficacy, recognizing its profound impact on student achievement. They are expanding leadership opportunities through classroom walkthroughs and school visits. While proud of the Next Generation Accountability Index progress, they know students are capable of more. They remain committed to reducing chronic absenteeism, coining the term 'chronically present,' implementing PBIS and restorative practices, and supporting high school readiness.

With Commissioner's Network support, they are implementing the Dignity Index so students can learn to disagree with dignity. They truly seek to become the first district in the country to use the Dignity Index systemically from kindergarten through adult education. This fifth year is about

more than financial resources, it's about fulfilling the larger purpose of schooling to develop active, passionate, kind young people who are critical thinkers.

The Committee members engaged in discussion with Hamden Middle School and asked about supports for special populations showing lower scores and progress towards English proficiency. The team explained they had an uptick in multilingual students last year and many students arriving with IEPs mid-year. Professional development has focused on co-teaching models with regular teachers partnering with special education teachers. They have dedicated staff for English language learners and co-teachers in all English classes, with a model meeting all needs within general education rather than separate settings. Over the past couple years, focus shifted from just IEPs to actual teaching and learning for students with disabilities.

When Committee members asked about walkthroughs, the Hamden Middle School team explained that teachers participate along with directors, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. Each visit has a focus (math, special education, etc.), with relevant district staff and teachers invited to join. The goal is getting new teachers into colleagues' classrooms to establish different experiences of a good model. In secondary administrative meetings, all directors walk through three times, alternating monthly between middle and high school.

Members of the Committee noted an uptick in suspensions. Principal Trauner explained that especially in October, there were alterations despite restorative interventions. When strategizing how can the school go about preventing these interactions, it was thought that by reducing the number of students in the hallways by 40 percent during transition periods, there would be a decrease in these types of incidents. It was found that once implementing this strategy, there's been a significant decrease in altercations. To continue to reduce out-of-school suspensions and chronic absenteeism, they created 'reverse in-school suspensions,' where students attend classes accompanied by climate advisors, receiving additional support rather than being removed from learning. Superintendent Highsmith noted they are working to reduce suspensions, especially discretionary ones which are way down, but social media-based conflicts remain challenging. He touches on the point that the Dignity Index is important for teaching disagreement without violence.

McDonough Middle School, Hartford

Ms. Webb introduced McDonough Middle School in Hartford, which serves approximately 301 students in grades 6-8 and supports one of the highest needs populations, with over 80 percent eligible for free or reduced-price meals, more than half multilingual learners, and approximately 25 percent receiving special education services. Despite this complexity, McDonough has been a strong advocate for the Commissioner's Network model, consistently engaging in audits and monitoring, using feedback to refine systems, and demonstrating willingness to address challenges directly. The school's walkthrough system was highlighted as a particularly strong practice.

Mid-year audit findings indicate clear, consistent upward trajectory from the initial year through Year 4. All indicators previously rated below standard have been eliminated, with the majority now

rated proficient or higher. Importantly, there has been no meaningful regression year over year, signaling increased internal capacity. This progress is notable given the staffing challenges the school faced upon entering the network, particularly with staff retention, which have since been addressed. While some areas remain in development, including academic rigor, student engagement, attendance, and behavior, but systems are in place to support continued improvement.

Deputy Superintendent Dr. Kondra Rattley stated that under Principal Marjorie Rice’s leadership, significant improvements have occurred. Drawing on her experience as a former high school turnaround principal, Dr. Rattley emphasized the importance of aligning focused strategies with intentional resource allocation. McDonough’s progress reflects strengthened systems implementation, improved instructional practices, and academic gains across all content areas except science. Instructional efforts span all tiers and are supported by professional learning focused on differentiation, integrated planning, and culturally responsive teaching for multilingual learners and students with disabilities. Wednesday enrichment blocks provide additional opportunities for professional learning.

Executive Director Monica Quinones presented data showing ELA increased 4.0 percent overall and 4.2 percent for high-need students with no gap between special populations and general students. Mathematics outcomes also reflected academic growth. Notably, 22 multilingual learners exited services in 2024-25 school year, marking the first occurrence and the highest number in the district. Literacy increased by 16 points to 62.4 percent, with consistent year-over-year growth demonstrating sustained improvement.

Chronic absenteeism, previously among the highest in the district and state, has declined significantly over time, decreasing from 45.8 percent last year to 35.8 percent, and further to 20.8 percent as of December 10—representing a 10-point reduction to date. Contributing strategies include home visits, the Twilight team, Virtual Academy, the Walking School Bus initiative, and a strong emphasis on relationship-building with students and families. Staff stability was identified as a key factor in strengthening relationships and fostering trust.

Principal Rice explained that Year 5 will focus on establishing sustainability prior to exiting the network. She described several Year 4 accomplishments under the Talent domain, including continued implementation of professional learning systems; five staff members currently receiving coaching to build peer-coaching capacity; two staff members receiving paid leadership stipends; one staff member holding O92 certification and another in the process of obtaining it; and one staff member participating in an Alternative Route to Certification for TESOL cross-endorsement. Under the Academics domain, the school increased enrollment in Power Hour and Virtual Academy, expanded the McDonough Method instructional framework across all instructional tiers, and refined MTSS by using data to create a schoolwide “What I Need” block, ensuring all students are engaged in targeted learning to accelerate growth.

With respect to school climate and culture, Principal Rice described the implementation of the “Walking School Bus” initiative, identified as a key component of her five-year strategic plan.

This initiative is integrated with PBIS check-in/check-out supports and adult mentorship for students currently identified for attendance improvement or at risk of chronic absenteeism. Additionally, the school has refined Tier 2 and Tier 3 behavioral support systems to reduce office referrals and has launched 'Mornings with Martinez', a school-based program designed to strengthen family engagement. Under the Operations domain, teachers refined lesson planning practices to support consistent bell-to-bell instruction. Also, the school expanded its operations team by adding an office assistant to extend office hours, thereby enhancing the quality of customer service, and strengthening coordination with the Twilight team's engagement and support of families.

Regarding Year 5 planning, the school outlined plans to implement a team-teaching model that builds on instructional coaching through six-week cycles with targeting goals, pairing new teachers with veteran educators or veteran teacher teams. The school will also establish a larger professional learning community (PLC) structure to increase staff capacity and continue to ensure rigorous and engaging instructional practices across all tiers. Additional priorities include increasing the frequency of MTSS data review, providing Power Hour and Virtual Academy at-home kits to support families, and developing a student-to-student mentoring initiative, the 'Sunshine Club.' The school further plans to expand extracurricular offerings through additional clubs, intramurals, and parent-led organizations to support sustainability of initiatives such as the Walking School Bus beyond network involvement. Ongoing efforts will focus on streamlining the school improvement process to strengthen progress monitoring, leveraging Assistant Principal Conroy's Data Wise certification, building assessment literacy among all staff, and developing a sustainability plan to ensure the continuation of effective practices.

Committee members noted that the gains in English Language Arts (ELA) were particularly noteworthy, emphasizing that results of this magnitude are rarely observed. Principal Rice explained that teachers engage in universal instructional planning with intentional consideration of all students from the outset, centering multilingual learners and students with disabilities in the planning process. The school's co-teaching model for multilingual education and special education supports streamlined service delivery. Additionally, the school has established a comprehensive continuum of support for multilingual learners, including a newcomer center for ESL Level 1 students that provides a strong instructional foundation prior to transition into general education settings. The school has also added an intensive instruction classroom to support students with disabilities who have more complex IEPs and significant reading needs. Across these initiatives, students remain at the center of instructional decision-making, with educators designing learning experiences around student needs.

Committee members further acknowledged that, although chronic absenteeism rates remain elevated, the school has made meaningful progress, with rates decreasing by approximately one-third. While it was noted that the zero reflected on the data slide was inaccurate, the overall improvement was evident, with absenteeism currently approximately 10 percent lower than at the same point in the prior year. Given the school's small size, committee members recognized that each data point is significant and highlighted the school's ability to maintain detailed knowledge of individual students while actively working to address barriers to attendance. Committee

members also emphasized the significance of 22 multilingual learners successfully exiting language services, noting the difficulty of achieving such outcomes at the middle school level. The effectiveness of the co-teaching model was cited as a contributing factor, with observations that Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking students are developing proficiency across languages.

Committee members also commented on the strength of recent staffing decisions and the school's leadership stability, noting the importance of sustainability. Both Principal Rice and Assistant Principal Conroy are dually certified bilingual educators and members of the same graduate school cohort, with strong backgrounds in literacy and multilingual education. Dr. Rattley noted that this combined expertise in literacy and multilingual instruction was a key factor in Principal Rice's hiring and aligns with the school's current outcomes. Committee members underscored the importance of continued leadership quality and expressed anticipation for upcoming school visits, noting that strong performance at the middle school level is both uncommon and commendable.

Ms. Webb concluded that both schools would move forward to the full board for extensions in February or March.

IV. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 4:27 p.m. The next meeting will be on February 4, 2026.

Prepared by: Ruby Rodriguez