Connecticut State Board of Education
Hartford

Accountability and Support Committee

Wednesday, June 17, 2026
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 3:38 p.m.

Committee Members Present:

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

Committee Members Absent:

CSDE Staff Present:

Dr. Melissa Jenkins
Dr. Charles Hewes
Sinthia Sone-Moyano
Keith Norton
Mike McKeon
Jennifer Webb
Amanda Baksa
Leslie Navarrete
Ruby Rodriguez
Dr. Shuana Tucker
Deirdre Savarese
Joanne.R.white
Robin.Cecere
Tom Markoski

Guests Present:

- Dr. Andraé Townsel, Superintendent and CEO, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- Caitlin Richard, Chief Financial Officer, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- José Colón, Chief Operating Officer, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- Edward Wilson, Jr., Esq., Staff Attorney; Executive Director of Legal and Labor Relations; Acting Executive Director of Human Resources, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- Sherri Davis-Googe, Executive Lead of School Options, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- Dr. Arria Coburn, Academic Chief Officer, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- Dr. Andraé Townsel, Superintendent and CEO, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- Caitlin Richard, Chief Financial Officer, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford
- José Colón, Chief Operating Officer, Hartford Public Schools, Hartford

II. Approval of Minutes

For the record, the May 20, 2026, Accountability and Support Committee meeting minutes were not presented for approval at the June 17, 2026, meeting, as they were not included on the meeting agenda.

III. Update on Hartford Public Schools Fiscal Operations

Chairperson Benham recognized the meeting agenda item and opened the discussion to Dr. Charles E. Hewes, Deputy Commissioner of Innovation and Improvement, Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). Deputy Commissioner Hewes provided introductory remarks regarding CSDE’s ongoing accountability and support efforts related to Hartford Public Schools (HPS), including implementation of recommendations resulting from the Fiscal Services Review conducted by Public Works, the New Solutions K-12 Special Education Services Review, and the Office of Internal Audit review of magnet school operations.

Deputy Commissioner Hewes provided a comprehensive overview of the work of the Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) Accountability and Support Team (AST). He reviewed the State Board of Education's June 2024 action and discussed the three-pronged review process undertaken to assess fiscal operations, special education services, and magnet school operations within the district. Deputy Commissioner Hewes explained that the reviews identified strengths, areas for improvement, and a total of 64 recommendations intended to strengthen fiscal management, grants administration, staffing practices, special education services, student supports, and magnet school operations.

Deputy Commissioner Hewes explained that, following completion of the reviews and the State Board of Education's action, the Accountability and Support Team (AST) was established in July 2025 to provide a structured framework for ongoing collaboration and implementation support between CSDE and Hartford Public Schools (HPS).

He noted that the recommendations spanned multiple operational and programmatic areas and required coordinated support across several CSDE divisions and district departments. The AST was established to facilitate that coordination, provide technical assistance, align available resources, and support implementation of the recommendations.Deputy Commissioner Hewes reported that the AST includes representatives from multiple CSDE offices and bureaus, including Academics, the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success, the Bureau of Special Education, Regional School Choice, Strategic Partnerships, Talent, and Turnaround Offices, among others. He explained that the team's responsibilities include coordinating resources and supports across CSDE divisions, facilitating collaboration, providing technical assistance, reviewing implementation progress, identifying barriers and emerging needs, and assisting HPS in addressing areas identified through the reviews.

Deputy Commissioner Hewes reported that the AST met regularly with HPS leadership and staff throughout the 2025-26 school year to provide technical assistance, share resources, coordinate supports, and review implementation progress. He noted that these meetings provided opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, discussion of implementation strategies, coordination across departments, and identification of supports needed to advance the district's improvement efforts. He further explained that the work of the AST has focused not only on implementation of recommendations but also on strengthening organizational capacity, building institutional knowledge, enhancing cross-departmental collaboration, and supporting development of sustainable systems and practices capable of supporting long-term improvement. Deputy Commissioner Hewes reported that, of the 64 recommendations identified through the reviews, 23 recommendations have been completed, 33 remain in progress, and eight have not yet been initiated. He highlighted progress in fiscal management, grants administration, staffing recruitment efforts, special education systems, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), literacy initiatives, oversight of student services, and development of organizational structures designed to strengthen accountability and operational effectiveness. He further noted that HPS has developed numerous operational systems, protocols, procedures, guidance documents, and monitoring tools intended to strengthen district practices, improve consistency, and support informed decision-making across the organization.

Deputy Commissioner Hewes emphasized that future efforts will focus on continued implementation of recommendations, implementation fidelity, staff training, capacity building, and sustainability of newly established systems and practices. He noted the importance of ensuring that newly developed procedures, protocols, and organizational structures are consistently implemented throughout the district and supported through ongoing professional learning and leadership oversight. He further stated that continued attention will be given to recommendations that remain in progress or have not yet been initiated, while ongoing collaboration between CSDE and HPS will focus on sustaining improvements, strengthening internal capacity, and supporting long-term organizational effectiveness and student outcomes.

Deputy Commissioner Hewes welcomed Dr. Andraé Townsel, Superintendent and Chief Executive Officer, Hartford Public Schools; Caitlin Richard, Chief Financial Officer; José Colón, Chief Operating Officer; Edward Wilson, Jr., Esq., Staff Attorney, Executive Director of Legal and Labor Relations, and Acting Executive Director of Human Resources; Sherri Davis-Googe, Executive Lead of School Options; and Dr. Arria Coburn, Academic Chief Officer, to provide an overview of HPS' efforts to address findings identified through the various reviews and to strengthen district operations. HPS discussed the collaborative partnership established with CSDE through the Accountability and Support Team and described the ongoing technical assistance, problem-solving efforts, and resource coordination that have supported implementation activities across multiple departments. HPS provided context regarding the district's current fiscal condition and explained that Hartford continues to face structural fiscal challenges associated with declining enrollment, increasing special education tuition costs, transportation obligations, and expenditures related to school choice programs, including magnet schools, Open Choice placements, and private special education placements. HPS noted that these factors continue to place significant pressure on district finances and require long-term planning and policy discussions beyond the district's immediate control. At the same time, district leadership acknowledged the importance of strengthening internal systems and operational practices within areas directly under district control.

Regarding fiscal management, HPS described significant progress made in response to recommendations identified through the Public Works review. The district reported the hiring of a Chief Financial Officer, restructuring of finance operations, implementation of monthly budget monitoring practices, expanded financial reporting to the Board of Education, and adoption of budget management software to improve transparency and oversight. HPS further discussed the development of financial procedures, process documentation, operational guidance, and recurring monitoring structures intended to improve consistency, accountability, and long-term fiscal sustainability. HPS also discussed substantial improvements in grants administration. HPS reported the identification of programmatic grant owners, implementation of planning and monitoring processes, development of guidance documents, creation of centralized procedures, and establishment of recurring collaboration structures designed to strengthen grant management practices. HPS further discussed efforts to improve internal controls, streamline financial processes, strengthen documentation practices, and utilize technology solutions to improve operational efficiency.

A significant portion of the presentation focused on enrollment trends, magnet school operations, special education services, and long-term sustainability planning. HPS discussed the relationship between enrollment declines and district finances, noting that reductions in student enrollment do not always result in proportional decreases in staffing or operational expenditures because enrollment losses are often distributed across multiple schools and grade levels, requiring schools to maintain staffing, programming, and operational supports despite serving fewer students. HPS further reported that, over the past decade, the district has implemented approximately $187.6 million in budget mitigation measures and eliminated approximately 644 positions while continuing to adopt balanced budgets and maintain educational programming and student services. HPS noted that these efforts reflect the district's ongoing attempts to align resources with enrollment trends while minimizing disruption to student learning opportunities and essential services.
HPS further discussed the relationship between enrollment trends, school choice programming, and magnet school operations.

HPS reported that costs associated with special education tuition, transportation, Open Choice placements, private special education placements, and non-HPS magnet schools total approximately $155 million annually, representing roughly 30 percent of the district's overall operating budget. HPS explained that these expenditures continue to increase regardless of district enrollment declines and place significant pressure on long-term fiscal planning efforts. HPS noted that many of these costs are associated with statutory obligations and individualized educational services required through students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which the district is legally required to provide regardless of placement location or broader fiscal conditions. HPS discussed the fiscal challenges associated with providing specialized services, transportation, and placements required to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. HPS acknowledged that while many of these obligations are outside of the district's direct control, the district remains committed to meeting its responsibilities under state and federal law while working collaboratively with CSDE, municipal partners, policymakers, legislators, and other stakeholders to identify potential solutions and improve alignment between educational responsibilities, service delivery obligations, and fiscal accountability. HPS further discussed legislative and policy considerations related to special education funding, Open Choice placements, and school choice programming, noting that several proposals and recommendations intended to address these issues have been considered at the state level and continue to be part of ongoing discussions. HPS emphasized that many of these challenges are not unique to Hartford and reflect broader issues impacting districts throughout Connecticut.

HPS also discussed ongoing utilization and feasibility analyses intended to evaluate enrollment patterns, facility usage, operational efficiencies, and long-term sustainability considerations associated with magnet school programming. HPS emphasized the importance of balancing fiscal stewardship with continued access to high-quality educational opportunities and specialized magnet school programming for Hartford students and families. HPS further noted that the analyses are intended to support informed decision-making regarding resource allocation, enrollment trends, programmatic sustainability, facility utilization, and future operational planning. HPS discussed the importance of ensuring that future decisions are informed by both fiscal realities and student access considerations. HPS additionally provided a detailed update regarding implementation of recommendations related to special education services and student supports.

HPS discussed efforts to strengthen collaboration among special education, teaching and learning, human resources, finance, and operational departments to improve service delivery and ensure greater alignment across district systems. HPS reported that improvement efforts have focused on strengthening Tier 1 instruction, expanding Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), improving referral and monitoring processes, increasing access to grade-level curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities, enhancing coordination between general education and special education staff, strengthening literacy supports and intervention practices, increasing consistency in implementation across schools, and improving alignment between instructional supports and student needs. HPS further discussed the importance of strengthening collaboration between general education and special education systems to ensure students with disabilities have access to grade-level instruction, evidence-based interventions, and appropriate supports within the least restrictive environment.

HPS further discussed efforts to improve staffing stability and address long-standing shortages in critical special education positions. HPS reported that special education teacher vacancies decreased from approximately 54 positions, representing roughly 25 percent of budgeted special education teaching positions at the start of the 2024-25 school year, to approximately 20 vacancies, or 9 percent of budgeted positions, at the start of the 2025-26 school year. HPS attributed these improvements to targeted recruitment and retention strategies, including differentiated salary increases for special education teachers, recruitment incentives for hard-to-fill positions, earlier hiring timelines, expanded local and national recruitment efforts, Grow Your Own educator pathways, and partnerships with educator preparation programs and community organizations. HPS noted that recruitment efforts have focused not only on filling vacancies but also on building sustainable talent pipelines for future staffing needs. HPS further discussed participation in recruitment events, expanded outreach efforts, and partnerships designed to strengthen both short-term hiring and long-term workforce development.

HPS additionally discussed efforts to strengthen retention and improve employee support systems. HPS reported the development of onboarding structures, enhanced cross-departmental collaboration, implementation of exit interviews, and planned stay interviews intended to better understand employee experiences and improve retention outcomes. HPS further discussed mentorship opportunities, instructional coaching, professional learning opportunities, collaborative support structures, and employee engagement efforts intended to strengthen workforce stability and improve educator effectiveness. HPS noted that successful retention requires more than recruitment and compensation and includes ensuring that educators feel supported, prepared, and connected to the district's mission and improvement efforts. HPS also discussed efforts to optimize staff assignments by ensuring that special education staffing needs are considered earlier in the scheduling process and by aligning staff expertise with student needs. The district also highlighted significant progress in addressing paraeducator vacancies and strengthening support services for students with disabilities. HPS reported a 60 percent reduction in adult-support paraeducator vacancies, the hiring of approximately 112 paraeducators since July 2025, and a reduction in the average time from application to hire to approximately 16 days. HPS discussed the addition of dedicated recruitment support, reimbursement of certain assessment costs for prospective paraeducators, alignment of qualifications with CSDE guidance, and development of onboarding and professional support structures intended to improve recruitment, preparation, and retention. HPS noted that paraeducators play a critical role in supporting implementation of student services and ensuring that students receive required supports throughout the school day.

HPS further discussed efforts to strengthen programming and services for students with disabilities through expanded in-district programming, enhanced oversight of out-of-district placements, and increased coordination regarding students attending Open Choice schools. HPS explained that these efforts are intended to improve continuity of services, increase access to appropriate supports within district schools, reduce reliance on more restrictive placements when appropriate, and ensure students receive services in the least restrictive environment. HPS noted that continued improvements in staffing, instructional supports, internal capacity, and organizational systems are expected to contribute to improved student outcomes while also supporting the district's long-term operational and fiscal sustainability.

HPS further emphasized that many of the improvement efforts discussed throughout the presentation are interconnected and intended to strengthen organizational capacity, improve operational consistency, and establish sustainable systems that support students, educators, and district operations beyond the current accountability and support process.

Chairperson Benham opened the floor for comments and questions from the Committee. Committee members engaged in an extensive discussion regarding the district's implementation of recommendations, long-term fiscal sustainability, staffing capacity, educator supports, special education expenditures, grants management practices, and the sustainability of newly established systems and procedures. Committee members acknowledged the substantial amount of work completed by HPS and CSDE since the initiation of the review process and noted the progress reflected throughout both presentations. Members expressed appreciation for the transparent and comprehensive nature of the update while emphasizing the importance of ensuring that newly developed systems, procedures, and organizational structures become embedded within the district's day-to-day operations and organizational culture. Committee members further noted that the long-term success of the district's improvement efforts will depend not only on implementation of the recommendations but also on the district's ability to sustain those improvements over time.

Committee members inquired regarding the district's approach to monitoring implementation and evaluating the effectiveness of newly established fiscal, operational, and instructional systems. Questions focused on how HPS measures progress, identifies areas requiring adjustment, and ensures that improvements remain in place despite future staffing or leadership transitions. HPS discussed recurring leadership meetings, implementation monitoring processes, cross-departmental collaboration structures, professional learning opportunities, and continuous improvement practices designed to strengthen accountability and implementation fidelity. HPS further noted that many of the systems developed through the review process were intentionally designed to build institutional knowledge and reduce reliance on individual staff members.

Discussion further focused on enrollment trends, magnet school operations, and long-term sustainability planning. Committee members sought additional context regarding the relationship between declining enrollment and district expenditures and inquired about the extent to which enrollment losses can realistically translate into operational savings. HPS explained that enrollment reductions often occur across multiple schools and grade levels and do not necessarily result in proportional decreases in staffing or operational costs due to programmatic, instructional, and service obligations that must continue to be maintained. HPS further discussed the cumulative impact of enrollment declines over time and the challenges associated with balancing budget reductions while preserving educational opportunities and student supports.

Committee members also inquired about ongoing utilization and feasibility analyses and how those efforts may inform future decision-making related to magnet school operations, facility usage, enrollment patterns, and resource allocation. HPS discussed efforts to evaluate operational efficiencies, facility utilization, program sustainability, and long-term enrollment trends while maintaining access to high-quality educational opportunities and specialized programming for Hartford students and families. HPS noted that the analyses are intended to provide objective information to support future planning and informed decision-making regarding district and magnet school operations.

Committee members engaged district leadership in a detailed discussion regarding special education expenditures and the increasing costs associated with providing services to students with disabilities. Members sought clarification regarding transportation expenditures, tuition costs, out-of-district placements, Open Choice placements, magnet school placements, and services required pursuant to students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Committee members acknowledged the complexity of balancing fiscal stewardship with the district's obligation to provide appropriate educational services and supports to students with disabilities and expressed interest in understanding the extent to which these expenditures are within the district's direct control. HPS explained that a significant portion of special education expenditures are driven by statutory and legal requirements and are therefore not discretionary in nature. HPS noted that the district remains responsible for ensuring that services identified through a student's IEP are provided regardless of placement location and that associated transportation, specialized services, staffing, and programmatic costs must be funded in accordance with state and federal requirements. HPS further explained that while the district continues to explore opportunities for operational efficiencies, many of the most significant cost drivers are tied to legally mandated obligations and increasing student needs rather than discretionary spending decisions.

Discussion also focused on the financial impact associated with students receiving services outside of district-operated programs. Committee members inquired about the district's efforts to manage these expenditures while maintaining compliance with student service requirements. HPS reported that the district has prioritized strengthening internal capacity and expanding in-district programming where appropriate in order to provide additional opportunities for students to receive services within Hartford schools. HPS explained that increasing internal capacity may help reduce reliance on certain out-of-district placements over time while also supporting continuity of services, family engagement, and student access to programming within their home communities. Committee members further inquired about the relationship between school choice programming and special education expenditures. Discussion included the district's financial responsibilities associated with students attending Open Choice schools, magnet schools, and other educational settings outside of traditional district-operated schools. HPS explained that while these programs provide valuable educational opportunities for students and families, they also create financial obligations related to transportation, specialized services, and other supports that the district must continue to provide. HPS noted that many of these issues are not unique to Hartford and continue to be discussed among school districts, CSDE, policymakers, legislators, and other stakeholders as part of broader statewide conversations regarding funding structures, service responsibilities, educational access, and long-term sustainability.

The Committee further inquired about staffing recruitment and retention efforts, particularly within special education and other hard-to-fill positions. Members acknowledged the district's reported reduction in vacancies and expressed interest in understanding both the strategies used to attract qualified candidates and the systems established to support staff after hiring. Discussion focused not only on filling vacant positions but also on creating conditions that encourage educators to remain in the district and build long-term careers within Hartford Public Schools.

Committee members sought additional information regarding recruitment pipelines, workforce planning, onboarding practices, mentorship opportunities, coaching supports, workload management, professional growth opportunities, and employee retention strategies. Members emphasized the importance of workforce stability, particularly within special education, where staff continuity plays a critical role in student success and implementation of individualized services. HPS discussed ongoing efforts to strengthen recruitment through differentiated compensation strategies, targeted incentives for hard-to-fill positions, partnerships with educator preparation programs, expanded outreach efforts, Grow Your Own pathways, and other initiatives intended to increase the pool of qualified candidates.

HPS further described efforts to strengthen retention by improving the employee experience and supporting educators throughout their careers within the district. Discussion included structured onboarding practices, mentoring opportunities, professional learning, instructional coaching, collaborative planning opportunities, and employee support systems intended to help educators successfully navigate the demands of their roles. HPS emphasized that successful retention requires more than recruitment and compensation and noted that the district continues to focus on creating supportive working environments where educators feel valued, prepared, and equipped to meet student needs.

Committee members also expressed interest in how the district is supporting educators as new systems, procedures, and initiatives are implemented. Questions focused on how teachers, administrators, paraeducators, and support staff are being prepared to implement changes resulting from the review process and how HPS is ensuring that staff have access to the resources necessary for successful implementation. HPS reported that significant attention has been devoted to professional learning and capacity-building activities intended to strengthen implementation and support sustainability. HPS discussed ongoing investments in training, coaching, technical assistance, literacy supports, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), cross-departmental collaboration, and instructional support structures designed to build internal expertise and strengthen student outcomes.

Throughout the discussion, Committee members emphasized the importance of continuing to build organizational capacity and institutional knowledge across the district. Members noted that sustaining improvements will require ongoing investment in staff development, leadership capacity, monitoring structures, and implementation supports. HPS agreed that long-term success will depend upon the district's ability to institutionalize newly developed systems, continue building capacity among staff at all levels of the organization, and maintain the collaborative partnerships that have supported progress to date. Committee members thanked HPS and CSDE staff for the presentation and for their continued efforts to address identified challenges, strengthen district operations, and support long-term student success.

IV. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 4:48 p.m. Harris Jr. moved to adjourn, and Zimmerman seconded the motion. The next Accountability and Support Committee meeting will be held in September 2026.

Prepared by: Leslie Navarrete