



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



### Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Public Hearing Testimony of Commissioner Charlene M. Russell-Tucker February 26, 2025

Good morning, Senator McCrory, Representative Leeper, Senator Berthel, Representative Zupkus, and members of the Education Committee. As the Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Education (Department), I am pleased to have the opportunity to provide you with testimony today regarding a series of bill proposals on your agenda.

#### **HB 7009, An Act Concerning the Establishment of the Connecticut State Seal of Civics Education and Engagement**

This proposal creates a State Seal of Civics Education and Engagement. The Department is in full support as it is in line with Section 14 of our agency bill. To ensure full access to the ability to affix the seal to the diploma of any graduate, we suggest changing the language in lines 4 and 21 from "local or regional board of education" to "a Connecticut diploma issuing entity" to ensure private schools may also exercise their ability to affix the seal. Furthermore, we propose changing the graduating classes from 2026 to 2027 to provide students with a more reasonable period of time in which to satisfy the criteria for earning the seal and to provide the LEA with appropriate time to develop local policy and procedure to determine seal eligibility.

#### **HB 7010, Act Concerning Paraeducators**

This proposal (1) continues for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2026, the Comptroller's subsidy program for the health care savings account or health care coverage of paraeducators, (2) requires boards of education to pay the full employee contribution to the municipal employees' retirement system for paraeducators, and (3) requires the Comptroller to annually reimburse such boards fifty per cent of the amount of such payments.

Paraeducators play a critical role in supporting students with disabilities across the state and provide a solid foundation to successful programming in a variety of settings based on the individual needs of our students. The Department is fully supportive of Section 1, however, we have significant concerns about the unfunded mandate for local school districts in implementing Section 2.

#### **HB 7011, An Act Concerning Student State-Wide Assessments**

This proposal reduces the grades in which the statewide mastery examinations are administered from every grade between 3 and 8, inclusive, to only in Grades 4, 6, and 8. While the Department strongly believes in reducing the amount of time students spend taking any assessment, we oppose this bill as drafted, and would like to offer the following points for your consideration:

- First and foremost, this bill violates federal law 20 U.S. Code § 6311 which requires that English language arts and mathematics assessments be administered to all students in each of the grades from 3 to 8, and in Grade 11.

- Given the transitions occurring at the federal level with the new administration, it is unknown as to what, if any, flexibilities in the federal testing requirements will be extended to states. Historically, the federal government has not provided any flexibility in the testing requirements across different political administrations, except during the pandemic.
- Even if testing flexibilities were provided, the Department would strongly recommend a more careful and deliberate approach to reducing testing time than simply eliminating state assessments in every other grade.
- State assessments take the average student less than 6 hours to complete, or less than 1% of their annual school hours. Additionally, last year, the Connecticut General Assembly passed Public Act 24-93, which required the Department to conduct a comprehensive audit of the assessments that are administered to students with the goals of eliminating redundant assessments, discouraging classroom activities that focus only on test preparation, reducing testing time, and maximizing assessments that provide actionable information for classroom teachers. This data collection is currently underway. The Department expects to have initial results from the audit by late March. As required by this law, the Department is also developing a program of professional learning for teachers concerning assessment literacy. Therefore, any efforts to reduce testing time should take a more holistic view of all assessments, including state and local assessments, with the goal of accelerating student learning.
- Administering assessments in every grade from 3 through 8, inclusive, has allowed the Department to develop and implement a robust student growth model that rewards schools for academically growing their students, whether they are low or high achieving. This is a critical component of Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System for schools and districts. Valuing growth more than achievement in the accountability system has enabled the Department to recognize many excellent schools in our Alliance Districts, several of whom have even earned National Blue Ribbon status.
- A more careful and deliberate approach is recommended because there might be a different combination of grades across elementary, middle, and high school that could potentially be exempted from state testing if federal flexibilities were available. For instance, the bill eliminates state mastery assessment in Grade 3; however, third grade achievement is an important early indication of student success in school with strong predictive value in the literature. Another important consideration should be the grade range of typical Connecticut schools; for example, there are over 250 schools with a low grade of PK or K and high grade of 5, but fewer than 60 schools with a low grade of PK or K and high grade of 6. If state assessments are only administered in Grades 4 and 6, there would be no growth measure for a large percentage of elementary schools.
- In high school, students tend to pursue a range of interests and pathways. In recognition of this diversity, Indicator 6 of the Department's accountability system incorporates different measures of postsecondary readiness. Students can demonstrate readiness by meeting benchmark scores on exams like SAT, ACT, Advanced Placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB). They can also demonstrate readiness by earning college credits while in high school through partnerships with institutions of higher education. The Department is also exploring industry recognized credentials as an additional measure within Indicator 6. This holistic approach to student success in high school is generally viewed as a more relevant and

valid indicator of student readiness than only considering student performance on a single standardized test. Incidentally, Department studies show that student achievement on the Grade 8 Smarter Balanced assessment is highly predictive of their performance on high school assessments and measures of college/career readiness.

- Another consideration in selecting the grades to assess is that measuring the foundational English language arts and mathematics skills are more important in the elementary and middle grades, while in high school the student is expected to *apply* those foundational skills in courses that are specialized (e.g., Algebra II, Biology) and personalized based on student interests (e.g., Intro to Manufacturing, Allied Health).
- Finally, other critical considerations if certain grades are not assessed include test content, test blueprint, and growth model. These are detailed and technical decisions that will require complex analyses, and extensive deliberations with educators, content specialists, and technical measurement experts.

In summary, the Department is supportive of the idea of reducing time spent on testing, including state testing pending federal flexibilities, but recommends a deliberate, careful, and data-informed approach, that is also informed by the results of the legislatively required assessment audit.

### **HB 7012, An Act Establishing a Working Group to Address Anti-Semitism in Schools**

This proposal would establish a working group to assist school districts in addressing antisemitism in public schools. The Department has been a longstanding supporter of the development of resources to support educating teachers and students on the importance of studying the Holocaust and genocides, working in partnership with Jewish Federation chapters, advocacy groups and individuals with expertise to provide curricular resources as well as most recently provided direct learning opportunities within the Connecticut Elementary and Secondary Social Studies Standards, which the State Board of Education (SBE) adopted in October 2023. From these standards we have developed model curricula for grades K-8 and intentionally provided a scope and sequence for districts that include the teaching of the Holocaust and antisemitism.

In 2018, Department personnel worked with the then legislated Connecticut Holocaust Education Advisory Committee to collaborate on the development and communication of guidance, suggested curriculum materials and resources, to assist schools with Implementing the Connecticut Holocaust and Genocide Education and Awareness Act (Public Act 18-24). [Teaching the Holocaust](#) -- as published on the department website -- is a valuable instructional resource for schools.

### **HB 7013, An Act Concerning Enhancements to the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program**

**Section 1** - transfers the responsibility for the administration of the local foods for schools incentive program (LFSIP) from the State Department of Agriculture (DoAG) to the Department and adds the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) as an “eligible entity” to receive funds. The LFSIP provides partial reimbursement to schools for the purchase of locally sourced foods (50 percent reimbursement) and regionally sourced foods (33 percent reimbursement). It further requires the use of federal funds in addition to state funds to make such payments; however, the changes in this bill would constitute an unallowable use of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) federal funds. Line 39

indicates that the food “may” be used as part of an eligible meal program; however, the only way in which the Department would be able to issue the reimbursement funding is if they participate in one of the federal meal programs. Therefore, the language should be changed to “shall.”

This bill also requires that the Department “seek and maximize existing federal funding available for purposes of administering the local food for schools incentive program.” Again, this would not be an allowable cost for USDA funding and seems to imply that the Department apply for grants to support the program. Historically, the Connecticut Department of Public Health has applied for and been awarded the federal Farm-to-School grant to conduct Farm to Early Child Care Education opportunities in partnership with the CSDE. Their application requires a letter of support from the CSDE. This would put us in direct competition for these funds.

**Section 2** - requires the Department to hire one full-time employee to administer the program. Without this FTE, we would not be able to administer this program, especially the expansion to CACFP participating programs. However, this position is not included in the Governor’s budget.

**Section 3** - appropriates \$1.5 million for this program, which is also not included in the Governor’s budget.

### **SB 1346, An Act Requiring Boards of Education to Post Curriculum Online**

This proposal would require local and regional boards of education to post curriculum on such board's Internet web site which represents a significant step forward in educational transparency and community engagement. By making approved curricula publicly accessible and posting it online, families and community members can stay informed and engaged in their children's education. Additionally, continuing the alignment with the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment safeguards students' rights and ensures that educational content meets high standards. This policy fosters collaboration between educators, parents, and stakeholders, ultimately strengthening the quality and integrity of our school systems.

The curriculum development process, as outlined in the department's K-12 Universal Curricula Design Principles: A Handbook for Evaluation, Renewal, and Development of District Curricula, begins with establishing a Curricula Development Team. This team, mandated by C.G.S., Sec. 10-220(e), serves as the driving force for curricular innovation and implementation. The team composition reflects a collaborative approach, including:

- Teachers representing various schools and grade levels
- District administrators
- Public members (including parents and business/industry representatives)
- Student representatives where appropriate
- Superintendent or their designee

To strengthen this collaborative process and ensure comprehensive curriculum design, development, review, and approval, we recommend enhancing the superintendent's role in this process.

## **SB 1347, An Act Concerning School Choice**

This proposal would require the Commissioner of Education to develop a program for the expansion of school choice in the state. The Department acknowledges the importance of exploring school choice options to enhance educational opportunities for Connecticut families. To fully support the bill, the Department would require added resources to support development of an expansion program with a focus on demand and resourcing as a precondition to expansion of choice opportunities. The governor's budget provides resources to support existing school choice programs above FY 25 enrollment levels

## **SB 1348, An Act Concerning the Creation of a Pilot Program for Certain At-Risk Youth**

This proposal would establish a pilot program facilitated by the Department and in partnership with a non-profit organization and up to 4 school districts to explore the impact of project-based learning on students at risk of withdrawing from school.

While the department appreciates the focus on implementing project-based learning in our high schools, it is important to share the work we have already undertaken in this area with school districts statewide K-12 on the implementation and scaling of project-based learning.

The Department procured through a request for proposals a high-quality online project-based learning model curriculum and instructional resources called Defined Learning PBL (project-based learning). This comprehensive resource includes standards-based performance task across K-12 for English language arts, science, social studies, mathematics, computer science and each of the 14 career and technical education (CTE) clusters. Since 2021, the Department has utilized COVID Relief Funds to offer this platform at no cost to 153 school districts of which 31 are identified as Alliance Districts and USD #1.

As of February 2025, data reports show:

- Eighty percent of educators report increased student engagement, up from 74 percent in 2023-24, with hands-on projects reinforced Defined Learning's ability to foster enthusiasm and real-world application.
- Student collaboration and teamwork increased significantly, from 71 percent in 2023-24 to 85 percent in 2024-25.
- New measurements reveal substantial gains in students' skills in research and inquiry (58 percent) and critical thinking (54 percent).
- With regard to Academic Performance Gains, there was a 17-percentage-point increase in reported student improvement (from 61 percent in 2023-24 to 78 percent in 2024-25).
- Twenty-one percent of teachers saw significant student academic improvement, while 57 percent noted moderate gains.

As a result of years of implementing and scaling project-based learning in classrooms across K-12 settings in Connecticut with Defined Learning, we know that these resources, equal access and partnership remain a transformative force in Connecticut classrooms, with consistent progress in engagement, skill development, and career exploration. To sustain this momentum, continued investment in curriculum alignment, professional development, and resource access is necessary.

If this proposal were to be passed as written, the Department would require at least 3 years to work with districts to revise their curricula and train teachers, as opposed to the suggested one-year pilot timeframe. Additionally, the bill requires a report to be issued in October 2026, the year after the pilot. It is unlikely that, due to the short timeframe of this pilot program, the report would produce any relevant information by which to make decisions if the program had a successful impact on student learning outcomes and should therefore be scaled.

To this end, the Department does not believe there is a need to develop a pilot with another partner to determine the impact of project-based learning on learners, specifically at-risk youth. We have conducted the pilot through the implementation of Defined Learning PBL with 153 Connecticut School Districts and have both qualitatively and quantitatively evidence of success. We recommend that the committee find a way to support the continuation of the implementation at scale. Please note that funding is not included in the Governor's budget for this purpose.

### **SB 1349, An Act Concerning the Charter School Approval Process**

This proposal (1) includes funding for new charters granted by the State Board of Education (SBE) in the Governor's annual budget, (2) revises the process by which charters are granted for state charter schools, (3) includes charter school students in a town's resident student count for purposes of education cost sharing grant calculations, and (4) requires a biennial report regarding charter schools to be submitted to the General Assembly.

Section 1 is new language that requires the Governor to include in the budget the funds for charter schools granted by the SBE. This would require the funding of all approved charter schools. The Department cannot support any language that would require the Governor to include specific funding for Charter schools in his budget proposal.

Section 2 authorizes the SBE to directly issue charters to charter school applicants and sets a date of July 1, 2025, for a request for proposals. This would bind the Legislature to funding all charter approved by the SBE. Depending on the exigencies of any given budget cycle, this may be impossible given the existing fiscal guardrails to which the state is committed.

Section 2c requires the SBE to annually accept applications and removes the provision limiting charter schools to towns that have one or more Commissioner Network schools. This could dramatically increase the number of charters awarded statewide and would require funding for additional staff members to review applications and perform compliance monitoring.

Section 3a revises the existing language to include students enrolled in a state charter, for the purposes of the equalization aid, in the count in their town. This would likely allow the town to continue to receive ECS funding for students enrolled in state charter schools located in their town. Estimating conservatively, this would increase ECS entitlements by at least \$55 million statewide, depending on a variety of factors. Funding is not provided for this increase in the Governor's budget.

Taken as a whole, this bill would significantly change the landscape of charter schools in CT, and put restrictions on the Governor and Legislature from making independent budgetary decisions.

## **SB 1350, An Act Concerning the Availability of Automatic External Defibrillators and Requiring Cardiac Emergency Response Plans in Public Schools**

This proposal requires (1) each board of education to develop a cardiac emergency response plan for each school governed by such board, and (2) the Department to establish a grant program to assist schools, with a priority given to priority schools, with implementing cardiac emergency response plans and a procedure for monitoring adherence to cardiac emergency response plans.

The Department would require additional resources to establish and administer this new grant program, which are not included in the Governor's Budget. The funds appropriated for the grant program in this proposal are also not included in the Governor's budget.

Thank you for providing us with an opportunity to offer testimony on these bills and we look forward to working with members of the Education Committee and the entire General Assembly throughout the remainder of this legislative session.