

**The Connecticut State Advisory Council  
for Special Education**

**Annual Report  
2022**



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## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

*“Every student in America deserves a high-quality education in a safe environment”*  
- President Biden

It is with great hope for the future of our students with disabilities that the members of the Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education (SAC) are submitting a summary of the discussions, priorities and recommendations of the 2022 meeting year. This is under the authority of 34 Code of Federal Regulations 300.167 and Section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) maintains an Advisory Council for the purpose of providing policy guidance with respect to special education and related services for children and youth with disabilities (ages 3 years to 21 years) in the state. In addition, the SAC is statutorily required to report to the General Assembly concerning recommendations for effecting changes in the special education laws.

The Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education is a unique sounding board that finds solutions through the collaboration of agencies, teachers, parents, advocates, and administrators-all supporting the education of students with disabilities. During our meetings, a diverse set of stakeholders work as a team on our Priorities and Recommendations for the CSBE and the Connecticut General Assembly. The SAC is in great need of Legislators to be a part of this unique sounding board. We currently have all five (5) General Assembly positions available.

The recovery and rebuilding from the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on students with disabilities has continued on during the recent school year and will extend into the coming years.

In this Annual Report we will address Special Education teacher and staff recruitment as well as retention, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Post-Secondary Outcomes for students, the Student Voice, the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (17 Indicators), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and mental health-not only of our students, but our Special Education teachers and support staff.

The Connecticut State Board of Education and SAC continue to have a strong shared commitment to students with disabilities in Connecticut and supports the development of recommendations that we feel will make a purposeful change.

As a final note, our Priorities and Recommendations are interwoven with the student *and* teacher voice. We hope you can hear it.



Susan Yankee, Chair, State Advisory Council for Special Education

For additional information, including agendas and meetings scheduled:

<https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Special-Education/CT-State-Advisory-Council-for-Special-Education>

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education ("SAC" or "Council") has established authority under Section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), 34 CFR Section 300.169. The Council's purpose is to advise the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) of unmet needs in educating students with disabilities and to recommend to the General Assembly any changes to the law, regulations, standards and guidelines pertaining to Special Education in the state.

The Council is to report to the General Assembly by February 15 in even-numbered years and January 15 in odd-numbered years.

This annual report reflects Council activity from January 2022 through December 2022. The Council has worked collaboratively with the Bureau of Special Education to address the statutory requirements of the Council. The Council reports to the General Assembly, CSDE, Office of Labor Relations, and the State Library.

## **COUNCIL LEADERSHIP**

Tammy Raccio served as Chairperson and Jennifer Lussier served in the role of Vice-Chairperson from January 2022 through June of 2022. The State Advisory Council would like to thank these individuals for their leadership and commitment to this work. In July, Susan Yankee was presented to the full Council by the Nominating Committee and elected as Chairperson. Jennifer Lussier remains in her role of Vice-Chairperson for another term. The current status of Committee participation is listed below. Committee members are appointed by Susan Yankee as Chairperson, to conduct Committee work:

**Executive Committee:** Chair, Susan Yankee, Vice-Chair, Jennifer Lussier, Bryan Klimkiewicz, SDE Liaison (non-voting), Nachi Bhatt, Tammy Raccio, Jeffrey Spahr and Catherine Summ.

**Legislative Committee:** Chair, Jeffrey Spahr, Jennifer Lussier, Rick Raucci, Ana Wittig, Doris Maldonado and Monica Hatton.

**Membership/ Nominating Committee:** Chair, Catherine Summ, Jennifer Lussier, Louis Tallarita, Mike Nunes (through June 30, 2021), Ana Wittig, Jonathan Metcalf, Melissa Wrigley, and Allison Kopie and Brian Smith.

## **MEMBERSHIP UPDATE**

The Council, with the support of the Membership Committee, is pleased to report a minimum number of vacancies and consistent participation of Appointed and At-Large members throughout this reporting period. The Council remains extremely healthy in terms of participation, attendance, and activity. The dedicated individuals currently serving on the Council remain committed and have demonstrated consistent attendance despite their numerous personal and professional responsibilities. In addition to its legislatively required members pursuant to section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes the Council included student member representatives through a by-law revision in 2019. The Council is committed to ensuring student voice is represented with up to four student members during a term.

At the time of this report, the Council has the following vacancies: Five General Assembly Elected Representatives, one for Higher Education appointed by Commissioner of Education and one Commissioner Appointment for (DOC).

During the past year, Membership Committee has completed the following activities:

- Drafted Student Recruitment document.
- Drafted an informational flyer for State Legislators.
- Reviewed applications and presented prospective members to the Executive Committee and Council. Candidate recommendations were considered based upon role, level of interest, and representation of the state of Connecticut with regard to racial/ethnic background, geographic residency/location, and the broadest range of representation of disability categories (parents of child/youth or individual with a disability).
- Recommended for appointment one parent representative and one student representative.

## **COUNCIL ACTIVITY**

Meeting agendas and minutes are posted on the CSDE website on the following link: <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Special-Education/CT-State-Advisory-Council-for-Special-Education/Meeting-Agendas>

### **Full Council Meetings were held on:**

- January 12, 2022
- March 16, 2022
- May 11, 2022
- September 28, 2022
- October 26, 2022
- November 30, 2022

**The Executive Committee** reviews Council business and develops the full Council agendas. This committee acts for the Council in all matters requiring decision between full Council meetings.

Executive Committee meetings were held on:

- January 10, 2022
- January 21, 2022
- March 9, 2022
- March 22, 2022
- May 3, 2022
- September 16, 2022
- October 18, 2022
- October 26, 2022
- November 10, 2022
- November 30, 2022

**Nominating/Membership Committees** prepare an annual slate of officers for the Council and monitor Council attendance and advise the Chair on activities related to the process of filling membership vacancies.

Membership Committee meetings were held on:

- January 10, 2022
- October 14, 2022
- December 12, 2022

Nominating Committee meetings were held on:

- March 9, 2022

**The Legislative Committee** reviews proposed legislation and summarizes the information to inform the Council, generates testimony, responds to legislation, and assists the full Council in developing priority areas and communication strategies to widely disseminate these priorities. The legislative session convened February 9, 2022, and adjourned May 4, 2022.

The Legislative Committee reviewed and responded to proposed legislation that have a tendency to impact the lives, welfare and education of students with special needs and/or learning or other disabilities. On a weekly basis the Director and others provided a list of such legislation. These proposed bills were reviewed by the members of the Legislative Committee and discussed.

After such review and discussion, those pieces of proposed legislation that were deemed worthy of further scrutiny were listed and monitored as they progressed (or not) through the system. On occasion a bill would progress to the point where it was presented to a committee for review and debate (and, possibly, further progress through the legislative process). The Legislative Committee would, when deemed appropriate, submit written testimony to the Committee expressing its support, points for consideration or observations to the committee.

At the end of the legislative session, a final report was delivered to the entire Council with a recap of the legislation that was presented for consideration and those bills that were ultimately passed.

Going forward, the Legislative Committee will continue to monitor any relevant upcoming legislation and continue to comment and support (or oppose as necessary) any such proposals.

Legislative Committee meetings were held on:

- February 17, 2022
- March 3, 2022
- March 31, 2022
- April 21, 2022
- April 28, 2022

**Ad-Hoc Due Process Committee** was established to review data and activity related to Connecticut's dispute resolution system. The Committee also recommends activities to increase knowledge across all special education stakeholders and to establish a foundation of trust and partnership between school districts and parents. The following activities occurred during the previous year:

- Reviewed Table 7 data for the 2020-2021 academic school year on special education complaints
- Recommended to the CSDE the establishment of a special education call center.
- Contemplated alternative dispute resolution structures including student led Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings and facilitated PPTs is ongoing

## FUNCTIONS OF THE COUNCIL

The Council has been authorized by the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* since the Act's inception in 1975. The Council is one of 50 “state advisory panels” authorized by the IDEA of 2004 [see regulations in *Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)*, 34 CFR Section 300.167]. The Council is also authorized under *Section 10-76i* of the *Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.)* with the express purpose to "advise the General Assembly, the State Board of Education (SBE) and the Commissioner of Education" on special education matters. The Council is specifically mandated by the IDEA and state statute to accomplish the following duties:

**State Advisory Council Functional Advisory Areas** – per Amendments to *C.G.S. Section 10-76i* (e.g., *P.A. 10-175*) and IDEA State Advisory Panel Duties (34 CFR Section 300.169)

- Advise the CSDE of unmet needs in educating children with disabilities and on the administration of the provisions of sections 10-94f to 10-94k, inclusive.
- Review periodically the laws, regulations, standards, and guidelines pertaining to special education and recommend to the General Assembly, and the State Board of Education any changes which it finds necessary.
- Comment publicly on any new or revised regulations, standards and guidelines proposed for issuance.
- Advise the CSDE in developing corrective action plans to address findings identified in Federal monitoring reports under Part B of the Act.
- Advise the CSDE in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities.
- Participate with the State Board of Education in the development of any state plan for provision of special education.
- Comment publicly on any procedures necessary for distributing federal funds received pursuant to the Education of the Handicapped Act, 89 Statute 774, 1975, 20 U.S.C. Code § 1400 et seq., as from time to time amended.
- Assist the CSDE in developing and reporting such data and evaluations as may be conducted pursuant to the provisions of said act.
- Report to the General Assembly not later than January fifteenth in the odd-numbered years and not later than February fifteenth in the even-numbered years, concerning recommendations for effecting changes in the special education laws.
- Review Due Process Hearing data and discuss findings and decisions. (34 CFR Section 300.513(d)) and (34 CFR Section 300.514(c)).
- Receive information regarding the provisions of a Free and Appropriate Public Education. Waiver of non-supplant requirement. (34 CFR Section 300.164(c)(4)).
- Advise the CSDE regarding the determination of risk ratio thresholds above which disproportionality is significant. (34 CFR Section 600.647(b)(iii)(A))



## **PROCESS for DETERMINING the “UNMET NEEDS” of STUDENTS with DISABILITIES:**

According to *34 CFR Section 300.169*, the Council’s duties include identifying the “unmet needs” within the state in the education of children with disabilities.

The Council engaged in the following activities to obtain data and information from a variety of stakeholders to assist the Council in determining the “unmet needs.” As with many things, this year continued to be unique and challenging as the needs of students with disabilities, parents, and educators were impacted by the ongoing pandemic. The Council engaged in the following activities to meet this responsibility:

- Council members shared input and provided reports from their representative stakeholder group during Full Council meetings during “Round Table.”
- Reports from the Parent Training Information center, CT Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC).
- Reports from students and the student/youth advisory groups.
- Reports from the Connecticut Council of Administrators of Special Education (ConnCASE) representative.
- Reports from agency representatives, including Department of Developmental Services (DDS) and Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS)/ Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB).
- Reports from the Department of Children and Families (DCF).
- Reports from the juvenile justice system.
- Reports from the McKinney-Vento representative.
- Reports from parents and representatives from several local, regional, and statewide parent groups.
- Reports from students and the student/youth forums (Leadership Training and Symposium).
- Public comment during meetings.
- State Performance Plan Stakeholder Input (Indicator Target Setting, Improvement Activities, Data Analysis)
- State Systemic Improvement Plan Presentation (CSDE/UCONN)
- State Department of Education presentations and reports.
- Special Education Division Director presentations
- Additional virtual meetings of the Executive Committee, and ad hoc committees were scheduled in response to the pandemic.

## **COUNCIL PRIORITIES**

From January through July, the Council was engaged in many critical issues and topics within special education including but not limited to Advisory activities related to the IDEA Part B 611 and 619 grant, The State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report, State Systemic Improvement Plan, ESSER II and ARP ESSER funding initiatives, and the new CT IEP and Special Education Data System (CT-SEDS). The Council also continued to support the established 2021-22 Priorities (see summary below):

- Special Education Recovery Policies and Procedures
  - Equitable Access to Acceleration Activities and Recovery
- Best Practices for School Reengagement
  - Social/Emotional/Mental Health (Students and Educators)
  - Community Access as part of Transition Services for Students
  - Strategies for Students with High Needs
- State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (17 Indicators)
  - Advise on data targets
  - Advise on Improvement Strategies
  - Advise on Data Analysis and Progress Review
- Dispute Resolution
  - Reviewed Table 7 data for the 2019-2020 academic school year.
  - Reviewed preliminary data on state special education complaints for the 2020-2021 academic school year.
  - Explored the concept of a Special Education Call Center within the CSDE.  
Studied current model in Rhode Island Department of Education.
  - Shared resources with Council Members:  
LRP Special Education Connections Presentation and Access.
  - Explored dispute resolutions alternative strategies including, but not limited to student led PPT meetings and facilitated PPTs.

## **2022-2023 PRIORITIES**

The following priorities were identified during the annual State Advisory council summer orientation/training session. During our subsequent meetings, the SAC continued to deliberate and refine our Priorities and Recommendations.

- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
- Special Education Staffing (Recruitment and Retention)
- Student Voice in Education
- Special Education and Social/Emotional Mental Health
- Post-Secondary Outcomes for Students (Employment)

## **COUNCIL RECCOMENDATIONS**

### **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**

Special Education is not a place. It is not a room at the end of the hallway, where students with disabilities are educated separately from their peers. It is a service or services provided in a variety of ways and settings, based on a student's individual needs. LRE an important tenant within the IDEA and the Council is committed to supporting districts and schools to ensure students are educated alongside their non-disabled peers.

### **Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:**

- Provide disability specific training and information to Parents, Families and Students (Inclusive practices).
- Expand Peer Natural Support opportunities.
- Collaborate with Higher Education to develop General Education Principals and leaders with Inclusive Practices.
- Improve leadership programs to establish inclusive culture in schools.
- Enhance MTSS interventions in the general education setting.
- Establish procedures for Self-Assessment of inclusive environment.
- Emphasize the importance of Assistive Technology within the Planning and Placement Team process.
- Combine achievement and LRE student level data within SPP data analysis process.
- Differentiate support and training to address students with Emotional Disability (Improvement plan).
- Establish a statewide Inclusion Committee.
- Find New / Innovative ways to share data.

### **Special Education Staffing (Recruitment and Retention)**

The Council is committed to recruitment and retention efforts for special educators across the state. The current status of special education teachers, related service providers, and paraeducator vacancies across our state and its impact on IEP implementation is alarming. Understanding that this is a national issue, the Council recommends the following.

### **Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:**

- Improve working conditions for special educators by exploring incentives and reducing administrative tasks of educators (paperwork).
- Study the impact of the pandemic on the teaching profession.
- Increase data collection mechanisms for special educator shortages across the state.

- Enhance special educator preparation by creating additional pathways. Explore programs to offset tuition, student loan forgiveness, and investment in next generation programs.
- Develop programs and practices to positively recognize special education efforts within schools/districts.
- Create specialized mentor programs for special educators.
- Study the current job duties and requirements for special educators in our state.

### **Student Voice in Education:**

This Council would like to underscore the importance of student voice in education. Student voice is particularly important within the context of the special education process.

#### **Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:**

- Student led PPT meetings
- Increased attendance for students in their PPT meetings.
- Student mentoring (Students who have graduated from public school).
- Student led professional development.
- Utilize Youth Advisory groups to develop priorities for the following school year.

### **Special Education and Social/Emotional Mental Health**

In addition to supporting students' academic needs, this Council acknowledges the importance of supporting student mental health and well-being.

#### **Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:**

- Work with school districts to connect with families regarding language barriers. Provide classroom teachers with additional help/support to address challenging behaviors (consistent, preventative support).
- Explore possibilities for aligning accountability structures (beyond the special education SPP/APR indicators to emphasize the importance of these activities).
- Reduce the use of exclusionary practice; replace with therapeutic supports and services.

### **Recommendations for Equitable Outcomes:**

- Incentivize districts to provide universal PreK in support of the equitable affordance of the research on the importance of the SEL and academic requirements of K readiness
- CT ought to remain the vanguard in protecting the rights of parents/students with disabilities by maintaining the burden of proof in special education due process with the local or regional board of education. This will continue to protect the families of SWD from the undue inequitable financial burden when seeking impartial complaint resolution.

### **Post-Secondary Outcomes for Students (Employment)**

This Council supports diverse employment experiences and opportunities for students with disabilities.

#### **Future considerations for the CSDE and CT legislators:**

- Involve the students in the transition process very early in their education process.
- Conduct robust interest inventories that explores a wider range of students' interests.
- Increase interagency collaboration.
- Align initiatives across agencies (i.e., customized employment, maps, life course).

### **State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (17 Indicators)**

As part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) the state of Connecticut is undergoing the process of reviewing its state performance plan (SPP) which occurs every six years. Annually the State reports against the targets in the SPP through its annual performance report (APR). This is a process that evaluates the implementation and outcomes for students receiving special education and related services.

There are 17 indicators comprising the key elements of the plan including six compliance indicators and eleven results indicators. The compliance indicators are set at 100% or 0% while the results indicators need to be set. With diverse stakeholder input, result indicators need to include rigor and show improvement over baseline data. Members of the Council have attended ongoing meetings in 2021 where they received trend data and were informed about current activities to provide input involving setting targets, analyzing options, and making recommendations for improvement activities to achieve progress.

Data targets focus on moving all students toward the improved target while continuing to review individual students at PPT meetings. Council members provided direct feedback on targets over baseline data on all results indicators and had the opportunity to provide comments. It has been the role of the Council members serving on the SPP/APR focus group to consider appropriate improvements over time for the entire population when strategies are implemented with fidelity.

#### **Future Considerations for CSDE and CT Legislators:**

- To achieve continued improvement, general education curriculum should be expanded to include accessible and differentiated content ground in Universal Design principles.
- Attendance guidance/resources from CSDE needs to continue to be a priority, especially with marginalized groups of students.
- Develop guidance that includes the best practices/strategies around results indicators and share with districts/all stakeholders.
- Expand training to include topics such as cultural competence, social emotional learning, social justice, and trauma - informed care
- Provide additional training for school administrators, around best practices for suspensions and expulsions and restorative practices as related to suspensions.

## CLOSING

The Council remains committed to advising the CSDE and the Legislators on the unmet needs of student's with disabilities in Connecticut.

The Council would like to encourage members of the public to attend future meetings. Our meeting schedule and information about The Council can be found by clicking on the following link: [Council Meetings](#).

The Council is also committed to creativity and improving communication structures to receive information from students, parents, families, educators, and all stakeholders who are interested in improving educational experiences for students who require special education. We look forward to 2023, the ongoing work, and fulfilling the awesome responsibility of the duties of this Council.

Respectfully Submitted,

Susan Yankee, Chairperson  
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State Advisory Council for Special Education  
Connecticut State Department of Education

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## APPENDIX A

### State Advisory Council Membership Composition and Vacancies

#	Legislative Reference	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
<b>Nine Members Appointed by the Commissioner of Education</b>				
1	1	Lori Fortuna	Parent	Commission of Education – Parent or person with Disability
2	1	Susan Yankee	Parent	Commission of Education – Parent or person with Disability
3	1	Doris Maldonado	Parent	Commission of Education – Parent or person with Disability
4	1	Michael Scanlon IV	Person with a disability	Commission of Education – Parent or person with Disability
5	1	Tammy Raccio	Parent	Commission of Education – Parent or person with Disability
6	1	Jake Shumbo	Person with a disability	Commission of Education – Parent or person with Disability
7	1	Bryan Klimkiewicz	Connecticut State Department of Education	Commission of Education – Official of State Department of Education
8	1	Louis Tallarita	Connecticut State Department of Education	Commission of Education McKinney-Vento official
9	1	Joan Nicoll-Senft (retired summer 2022, position vacant)	Central Connecticut State University	Commissioner of Education-Higher Ed Representative
<b>Other Commissioner Appointments</b>				
10	2	Brian Smith	DDS	Commissioner of Developmental Services

11	3	Nachi Bhatt	Department of Children and Family Services	Commissioner of Children and Families
12	4	Vacant Debra Grainsky (fall 2022 left Corrections, position vacant)	Corrections	Commissioner of Corrections
13	5	Denise Drummond	Parent	Parent Leadership Training Institute within the Commission on Children
14	6	Jane Hampton Smith	Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center	Parent Training and Information (PTI) Center
15	7	Catherine Summ	Aging and Disability Services/Bureau of Education Services for the Blind	Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services

#### Elected Representatives

16	8			General Assembly- Speaker of the House appointee
17	8	Jill Barry (resigned from SAC fall 2022, position vacant)	State Representative of General Assembly	General Assembly – Majority Leader of the House of Representatives
18	8			General Assembly – Minority Leader of the House appointee
19	8			General Assembly – President pro tempore of Senate appointee
20	8			General Assembly – Minority Leader of the Senate appointee

#### Other Legislative Appointments

21	9	Kim Williamson	Speech and Language Pathologists	Member of CT Speech-Language-Hearing Association -President pro tempore of Senate
22	10	Rick Raucci	Milford Public School Teacher	Public School teacher appointed by Majority leader of the Senate



23	11	Allison Kopie	Aging and Disability Services/Bureau of Rehabilitation Services	Representative concerned with transitional services appointed by Minority leader of Senate
24	12	Kevin Keating (appointed)	Connecticut Council of Special Education Administrators	Representative of CONNCASE appointed by speaker of the House of Representatives
25	13	Cassandra Reilly	Charter School	Representative of Charter Schools appointed by Majority leader of House of Representatives
26	14	Ana Wittig	Oak Hill	Representative of CT Association of Private Special Education Facilities appointed by Minority leader of House of Representatives
27	15	Patricia Nunez (resigned) Nancy DeCrescenzo (appointed)	Judicial Dept.	Representative of Judicial Department appointed by the Chief Court Administrator

**Seven Members Appointed by the Governor**

28	16	Jeffry Spahr	Parent	Governor – Parent or person with Disability
29	16	Jennifer Lussier	Parent	Governor – Parent or person with Disability
30	16	Jonathan Metcalf	Parent	Governor – Parent or person with Disability
31	16	Melissa Wrigley	Parent	Governor – Parent or person with Disability
32	16	Goviana Morales	Parent	Governor – Parent or person with Disability
33	16	Dimpy Malvania	Parent	Governor – Parent or person with Disability

34	16	Lena Esposito		Governor – Parent or person with Disability
<b>Other Appointments</b>				
35	17	Tom Cosker	Disability Rights of Connecticut	Representative of CT Protection and Advocacy Center appointed by the Governor
36	18	Mia Giantonio	Student with disability	Other Members appointed by Special Advisory Council
37	18	Thomas Melillo	Student with a disability	Other Members appointed Special Advisory Council

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Qualities of an Effective Student Member of the State Advisory Council for Special Education**

- Honesty; about themselves and about group they represent
- Willingness to be heard – they shouldn't be intimidated by being a youth working with a board of adults
- Willingness to work as part of a team – they should have an understanding that their voice is important, and they bring a unique perspective to the team
- Understand the importance of their role and have the dedication and commitment to be able to attend and participate in the meetings
- Motivation – they should be motivated to share the student perspective
- They should look at this role as an opportunity to make a difference and better themselves in the process