



STATE OF CONNECTICUT *STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION*



Connecticut General Assembly Education Committee Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell March 14, 2018

Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle and members of the Education Committee. I am Dianna Wentzell, Commissioner of the Department of Education, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to testify before you today regarding a series of important education-related proposals.

Raised Senate Bill 454, An Act Concerning School Security

The Department is very supportive of enhancing school security and strengthening safety planning and protocols across our state. We fully support the new language in section 5 of this proposal that would require local emergency plans in every town and city to include protocols for the notification of an emergency to all public and nonpublic schools and child care facilities in the town or city. We do not believe, however, that the requirements to file school safety plans with the Department in sections 1 or 2 are necessary. These plans are already filed with the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP) annually. DESPP has the expertise to evaluate such plans, whereas the Department of Education does not. Furthermore, we believe a single point of filing will lessen any confusion that our local or regional boards of education may have.

Raised House Bill 5445, An Act Concerning Alternative Educational Opportunities For Expelled Students

The State Board of Education (SBE) recently approved a document entitled "Standards for Alternative Educational Opportunities for Students Who Have Been Expelled" after a process that spanned over a year and included the engagement of multiple stakeholders as well as the Alternative Schools Committee (ASC). Given the urgent need to ensure that the current population of expelled students receives high-quality programming that will position them for success, the Department strongly supports the implementation of the standards as adopted by the SBE, with no further revisions at this time. The Standards developed using the aforementioned process, and approved by the SBE do not include a specific number of hours, as it was determined through much discussion that comparability to the regular school environment was a more appropriate approach. Lastly, the Department is currently engaged in working with the ASC to develop best practice guidelines for implementing the approved Standards. The guidelines will include, but will not be limited to, quality of programming. We would ask the Committee to allow the Department to complete its work before making additional changes to these policies.

Raised Senate Bill 452, An Act Concerning The Inclusion Of Holocaust And Genocide Education And Awareness In The Social Studies Curriculum

We believe that the vast majority of districts across our state are already providing curriculum relating to Holocaust and genocide awareness in their classrooms, therefore the Department is in support of

including this requirement in the list of courses which must be offered in a district. We would ask however that the language is broadened to specifically contain all 20th century genocides including the Armenian, Rwandan and Cambodian Genocides.

Raised House Bill 5447, An Act Implementing The Recommendations Of The Auditors Of Public Accounts Concerning Private Providers Of Special Education

The Department has concerns with this proposal. We do not have the staff or funds necessary to create a rate schedule for Approved Private Special Education Providers (APSEP). Currently, the Department has 1 full time employee, paid through federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) dollars, who works with the APSEPs and focuses on the approval and monitoring of over 80 approved programs. It is unclear whether IDEA funding could be utilized for the creation of a rate schedule and our fiscal office also does not have the capacity to take on this task. We do believe, however, that we could likely create the guidelines outlined in lines 42-44 of this proposal.

Raised Senate Bill 455, An Act Concerning Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Over the last three years, the Department has made minority teacher recruitment and retention one of our top priorities. We have engaged in many efforts, with the Committee's help and direction, and have carried out several non-statutory policy changes in collaboration with the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force. The first section of this bill will codify in statute much of that policy work, and the Department fully supports it. We also support the language in section 7 and look forward to continued collaboration with the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force. The Department believes that the work outlined in section 5 of this proposal has already been carried out by the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council, therefore we are unsure as to why this section is necessary. The Department also has concerns with several remaining sections of the proposal and would ask for an opportunity to meet with the Committee Chairs to discuss those changes. Please know, we are fully committed to this work and look forward to having an opportunity to meet with you.

Raised House Bill 5451, An Act Concerning Funding For Regional Agricultural Science And Technology Centers

The Department would be pleased to see an increase in funding for all of our public school and choice programs throughout the state, however, in light of our current fiscal environment, we believe these funding decisions should not continue to be made in silos and should more appropriately be made as part of a larger funding conversation.

Raised Senate Bill 456, An Act Concerning Assistance To School Districts That Enroll Students From Puerto Rico Who Have Been Displaced By Hurricane Maria

This proposal would allow for cooperative agreements to share resources between districts that have enrolled students displaced by Hurricane Maria. We believe districts are already permitted to enter into these agreements and are not convinced this legislation is actually necessary, however we are fully supportive of its intent and believe the language should be broadened to include other states and territories impacted by Hurricanes, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Raised Senate Bill 457, An Act Concerning The Creation Of An Alternative Route To Certification Program For School Social Workers

The Department does not believe this proposal is necessary. School social workers are not a shortage area in our state and a planned preparation/certification program is not required for certification as a School Social Worker. Any individual with a master's degree in social work from a school of social work that is accredited by the Council on Social Work Education may be eligible for certification as a School Social Worker.

Raised House Bill 5452, An Act Concerning The Recommendation Of The Task Force On Life-Threatening Food Allergies In Schools

This proposal would, in part, require the Department to revise the guidelines for life threatening Food Allergies, as well as revise the Healthy and Balanced Living Framework and update culinary arts standards. It also requires the Department to work with the Department of Public Health to develop a model school bus safety protocol. This would be a significant undertaking. The Department does not have the capacity to carry out this work or the resources to hire additional staff. Additionally, consistent with our testimony for Raised House Bill 5341, we have serious concerns with any language pertaining to training school bus drivers to administer medications, especially when there is no specificity around the types of emergencies or medications they will be required to administer. Therefore, we are unable to support this proposal.

Raised Senate Bill 458, An Act Concerning Various Revisions And Additions To The Education Statutes

Section 1 - The rules for calculating graduation rates are established by the U.S. Department of Education in conformance with federal education laws including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Pursuant to these enrollment and graduation rules, students who are enrolled in middle college programs, early college high school programs or other similar Connecticut early college opportunity programs will be enrolled in their high school/alternative program of record and counted toward the on-time graduation rate if they have completed all the requirements necessary to receive a regular high school diploma by the end of the student's fourth year. Students who take longer than four years to complete the graduation requirements can be included in extended-year graduation rate calculations (i.e., 5-year or 6-year rates). If this legislation is passed, the Department will plan to identify high school students who are also participating in these programs and will continue to apply the federal rules for graduation rate calculations. We would like to note, that a student is not eligible to count toward receiving ECS dollars once they have graduated. Therefore, if all requirements for graduation are met by year 4 and the student continues in an early college high school program, the district will not receive ECS funding for that student.

Section 2 – There are currently four Early College Opportunity programs operating statewide without the necessary statute in place to account and potentially pay for the students when they enter their 13th and 14th years. The Department recognizes the imminent need to resolve this and is willing to lead that work with the Office of Higher Education to be sure that an appropriate resolution can be found.

Section 4 - The language adds a new type of judicial facility to be eligible for reimbursement under the excess cost grant. It is the Department's understanding that the education of these students is currently

being paid for through other mechanisms (i.e. state agencies). Moving these costs into the excess cost grant further reduces the amount of funding (which is capped within available appropriations) available for assisting districts with the costs of educating their highest need students with disabilities which is the purpose of these funds. Districts cannot currently access funds in this account until they exceed 4.5x their average per pupil cost. Even at that threshold we still only reimburse districts for between 75% - 80% of their costs over 4.5x. We understand that the Court Support Services Division within the Judicial Branch has a different interpretation of the impact of this proposal and we will continue to work with them moving forward.

Raised House Bill 5448, An Act Concerning The Alignment Of Education And Workforce Needs

As with so many previous bills this session, the Department does not have the capacity or resources to carry out this work. Furthermore, we believe it is duplicative to work already being performed by the Regional Workforce Advisory Board in collaboration with the Connecticut Technical and Education Career System Board, which includes the Commissioners of Labor, Economic and Community Development and Education.

Raised Senate Bill 453, An Act Concerning Classroom Safety And Disruptive Behavior

The Department has serious capacity concerns with several sections of this proposed bill. In the last four years, the Department has sustained a loss of 56 full time employees and is not in a position to collect, review and approve safe school climate plans for every district across the state. Currently the Department has 1 full time employee who does this work, therefore we also have concerns with being able to comply with the additional reporting requirements. Furthermore, while the Department values the role of the school social worker in the education system, the proposed ratio of one social worker to 250 students is not attainable for most districts due to cost. It is recommended that need serve as a driver for the number of social workers required in districts, as indicated in the Department's school social work guidance document. It states, "...approximate ratios for school social work staff to students should be based upon the unique characteristics and needs of the student population, as well as the available mental health services in the larger community."

Raised House Bill 5446, An Act Concerning Minor Revisions To The Education Statutes

The Department supports several sections of this proposal but has concerns with sections 4 and 6.

Section 4 - Changes the requirement that the "gross dental screenings" required as part of the school health assessment be performed by a dentist rather than a physician. Similar to testimony that we provided to the Public Health Committee on House Bill 5213, this creates a burden to families who have to schedule a separate visit to the dentist, potentially keeping the child out of school until the dental visit can occur and requiring parents to miss work who cannot afford to do so. Physicians are qualified to conduct the gross dental screenings as part of the overall health assessment and refer to oral health specialists as necessary.

Section 6 - The language adds: "including intervention and prevention models that address the needs of students with disabilities" to the Department's catalog of truancy intervention models. Many of the models are able to provide interventions for students with disabilities even though that may not specifically mentioned. The Department plans to continue to add models as we learn about them – including those that may have shown success with students with disabilities. The scope of the catalog

is “intervention” for students who are truant not “prevention” of truancy. The addition of the term “prevention” in the statute does not align with the original intent of the act or the catalog and would require an entire process to identify models designed to prevent truancy.