

**Education Committee**  
**JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT**

**Bill No.:** HB-6556

AN ACT ADDRESSING ISSUES CREATED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON

**Title:** PUBLIC EDUCATION IN CONNECTICUT.

**Vote Date:** 3/29/2021

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute Change of Reference to Appropriations

**PH Date:** 3/8/2021

**File No.:**

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**SPONSORS OF BILL:**

Education Committee

**REASONS FOR BILL:**

This bill addresses issues arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding public education.

Section 1: Requires SDE to (1) use the statewide mastery exams to identify and measure learning loss and student disengagement and (2) develop mitigation strategies for districts to use.

Section 2-3: Requires alliance districts to provide a summer learning program; allows SDE and the after-school committee to administer a grant program for districts offering summer learning programs.

Section 4: Requires SDE to work with RESCs to support grant recipients of the after-school program grant in existing law; allows SDE to keep up to 7.5%, rather than 4% of the program appropriation to do this.

Section 5: Allows substitute teachers, for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, to hold an associate degree if subbing more than 10 days or a high school diploma if subbing for 10 or fewer days.

## **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

### **Charlene Russell-Tucker, Deputy Commissioner, State Department of Education:**

Our statewide summative assessments are vital to determining student growth and COVID recovery. In response to Section 1(c), SDE is currently designing a learning framework for education post-pandemic to address the points raised, which will include recommendations for diagnosing, planning, and monitoring learning using evidence-based guides and strategies. The framework will provide recommendations for summer learning and extended day models. They suggest removing Lines 41-44, as there is no need for a single definition of student engagement and a new one could be burdensome on districts. They collect and report attendance and discipline data. This year, they also know how students are attending (in-person or remote). SDE does not believe they need the yearly report outlined in (f), and they suggest 2 reports, due Jan 2022 and Jan 2023. Existing annual reporting will monitor student achievement. SDE is also supportive of expanded summer programming, but additional resources would be necessary. The minimum hour requirement would require significant additional funding to support a variety of additional staff.

### **Sarah Eagan, Acting Child Advocate, Office of the Child Advocate:**

The global pandemic, and its effects has taken, an enormous toll on children. The last year has likely had the most profound impact on the state's most vulnerable children, those who have significant disabilities, children who live in families struggling with economic, housing, and food insecurity, and children with mental health treatment and other support needs. It will be imperative that school districts are supported to deliver all children developmentally and educationally appropriate recovery services and enhanced opportunities going forward.

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

### **Pahola Almonte; Ricardo Alvelo; Kristen Estabrook; Catherine Jackson; Phil Kent; Tanis Klingler; Julia Leonard**

COVID-19 has made us aware of student disengagement. Engagement is critical for academic growth and, more than attendance, reflects a student's connection to school. In order to close the engagement gap, we must identify disengaged learners, provide opportunities to mitigate learning loss for these disengaged students on the district level, and leverage best practices and accountability measures on the state level to support districts, schools, teachers, and students to meaningfully increase student engagement and improve student outcomes. This bill inaccurately conflates attendance with engagement. Engagement is measured by student participation and output, and that must be reflected in this bill.

**Ryan Brown, Teacher:** As a teacher, I knew firsthand that student engagement is critical to academic growth and is pivotal to students' connection with school and students' ability to find success both in academics and in their social/emotional development. Black and Brown students have barriers that do not allow them to access equitable educational experiences. It is vital to identify learners who are disengaged to attempt to close the achievement gap. We must provide opportunities to rectify learning loss for disengaged learners on the district and state level, as well as employ accountability measures on the state level to support districts.

**Andrew Feinstein, Chair, Special Education Equity for Kids in CT:**

While this bill's attempt to address issues created by the pandemic is commendable, it still fails to address other critical issues. Any failure to provide a FAPE, whether negligent or created by circumstances wholly outside the control of the school district, entitles a student to compensatory education. SDE has failed to issue guidance on this issue. This bill should mandate the provision of compensatory services, when needed on an individualized basis, and provide that some portion of the federal stimulus money that has come to the state or will come to the state be dedicated to fund those services.

**Kate Field, Teacher Development Specialist, Connecticut Education Association:**

Children were already facing a mental health crisis prior to the pandemic, a crisis that can only have been exacerbated by COVID. Schools will need more counselors, resources, and training to address this national emergency as well as the freedom to safely innovate and time to develop the skills needed to meet the challenges we are only now beginning to understand. Add SEL to a school's accountability index, include SEL as a component in student success plans, require inclusion of SEL in educator performance evaluation, call for collaboration with bargaining unit representatives to create sample SEL learning.

**Robert Goodrich, Executive Director, RACCE:**

Addressing learning loss must be a top priority for every district in our state. COVID-19 has further revealed to educators, parents, and students the complexities of creating and sustaining a culturally responsive educational environment. Black and Brown students have had and continue to have barriers to equitable educational experiences, and this is one barrier that we see growing. Student engagement reflects a student's connection to school.

**Gale Heath, Administrative Associate, CT Association of Boards of Education:**

Despite the best efforts of school districts, the pandemic has created significant learning challenges as well as social and emotional challenges for all students, particularly those most vulnerable. Supporting our students by accelerating their learning opportunities and supporting their social and emotional well-being will take a sustained effort at the state and local level. SDE must have enough staff to meet the requirements of this legislation. They have made outstanding efforts throughout the past year to support school districts, students, staff and families during the pandemic.

**Jan Hochadel- President, AFT CT:** The proposed mastery tests are a convenient and useful way to "of identify and measure the existence and severity of learning loss," but we wonder if it is the best way to provide a complete picture. Mastery examinations can identify changes in literacy and numeracy skills, but learning loss is not confined to those strands. We also will see losses in social and emotional learning, technical skills, and other areas that have a dramatic impact on a student's development and success. A broader picture of each student and the student population in general will better enable us to create programs that help students repair the damage of the past year.

**David Lenihan, Director of Government Affairs, CASBO:**

Many food service operations are experiencing significant financial losses for FY 2020-21 with 80% anticipating losses in the range of \$100,00 to over \$1,000,000 due to severe drop in revenues (decreased participation, loss of ala carte sales, etc.) and increased expenses (PPE, cleaning supplies, staffing, supply chain interruptions, prepackaging, etc.). These losses are unsustainable and must be borne by boards of education. School districts need additional funding and more flexibility to allow them to deal with all the Covid-19 impacts. They encourage all key stakeholders to evaluate other long-term solutions including expanding National School lunch program to help address these problems.

**Hamish MacPhail, Policy and Research Director, ConnCAN:** The state must mitigate learning loss by (1) accurately measuring learning loss through statewide Spring 2021 assessments, (2) creating a portfolio of mitigation strategies, including: afterschool, summer and small group tutoring, including learning pods at no/low cost and (3) ensuring districts have the resources and flexibility to adjust length of school day/ school year to meet the immediate academic needs of their students.

**Maria Morelli-Wolfe, Attorney, GHLA, CLS, LAA:** Special education students will often be owed more than what the proposed legislation generally characterizes as learning loss, because of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates around a free appropriate public education (FAPE), which is not the same as loss of learning. These decisions must be made on an individual basis by the student's planning and placement team. Learning loss mitigation offers must be flexible and available over an extended period.

**Daniel Pearson, State Director, Educators for Excellence-Connecticut:**

We must develop comprehensive strategies to mitigate learning loss from this pandemic while also developing long term solutions to finally address the structural inequities in our education system. This includes, enhancing afterschool and summer programs, highly focused and highly individualized tutoring programs during and after school hours, ensuring districts have the necessary resources to create and sustain these programs, etc. They recommend adding the recommendations provided by ConnCAN on clearly defining student engagement and disengagement.

**Syeita Rhey-Fisher, Teacher:**

Attendance is not the same as engagement. In addition to investing in programs such as Harpara and Nearpod, my school began tracking students' work completion scores for every class to help measure engagement, again, separate from attendance. With these programs, I've been able to measure growth, recognize patterns in student work behaviors across content, celebrate, affirm them, and communicate new goals. Partnering with parents has been easier because I have something to reference and because of transparency. Parents have a better understanding of how distractions, babysitting, and other elements mentioned above impact their children's engagement & learning and will usually adjust appropriately.

**Jim Williams, Government Relations Director, American Heart Association:**

Requests an amendment that will address access to water in school for all children, which would require that any newly constructed public school, or a public school undergoing major renovations include touchless water bottle filling stations. All kids, no matter where they live, should have access to water in school. Drinking water can help children learn better, improve their short-term memory, and improve their fine motor skills and visual attention, which is important to learning activities such as reading.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

**Ronald Goodmaster:** I oppose this bill. When Covid-19 ends children in CT should return to in-person academic learning.

**Reported by: Dallas Emerle**

**Date: 4/5/2021**