



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee Testimony of Deputy Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker March 9, 2021

Thank you Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Minor, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Charlene Russell-Tucker, and I am a Deputy Commissioner at the State Department of Education. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Governor Lamont's proposed budget for FY 22 and FY 23, as it pertains to the State Department of Education (the Department).

While our state's economy and budget are improving, we continue to live in fiscally challenging times. The decisions that you make as legislators are seldom easy, but I know you have the best interests of our students in mind, and I am committed to working with you and with Governor Lamont on behalf of the Department and all of the children in the State of Connecticut.

Governor Lamont has made improving access to Open Choice programming, bolstering workforce development, and diversifying the teaching profession top priorities, as he outlined in his budget address on February 10<sup>th</sup>. Creating the best-trained, best-educated workforce in the world that is prepared to fulfill Connecticut employer demand, and ensuring students have broad access to employment opportunities, starts with getting our high school students through the higher education door, which is why we are particularly pleased that Governor Lamont's proposal increases postsecondary enrollment, particularly for first-generation, low-income, and minority students. It ensures that our high school students complete the student aid applications which will bring millions of additional federal dollars into the State, as the Governor outlined in his address.

The Governor's budget proposal for the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant continues his commitment to education. At a time of great uncertainty at the state and local level regarding anticipated fluctuations in tax revenue, districts can count on a firm commitment by the state to maintain their current levels of education funding. In addition, this means districts will not be negatively impacted by shifts in enrollment and student poverty measures that were revealed in their October 1, 2020, student enrollment filing with the department. We encourage local municipalities to make a similar commitment, and as such, we have proposed the extension of the Minimum Budget Requirement as a safety net for school districts.

This has been an unprecedented year of disrupted learning and social-emotional turmoil for our students at the hands of a relentless pandemic. As a result of the passage of the second installment of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, the Department has received an approximately 49 million dollar set aside for state utilization, which we plan to use on the following four overarching statewide priorities: (1) Academic Supports, Learning Loss, Learning Acceleration and Recovery; (2) Family and Community Connections; (3) School Safety and Social-Emotional Well-being of the "Whole Student" and of our School Staff, and (4) Remote Learning, Staff Development, and Closing the Digital Divide.

The Governor has said in the past that education is the opportunity engine for all of our young people. There is likely nothing more crucial to setting a child up for success than that child's education. For these reasons, it is important that we remain child-centered throughout the rest of the session as we engage in discussions that pertain to funding education, because our adult decisions directly impact the lives of our children.

We understand the ongoing need for fiscal prudence, and we stand ready to do our part, while continuing to implement policies that work toward closing achievement gaps, supporting teachers, diversifying the workforce, elevating learning, and acting in the best interests of the children of the State of Connecticut.

The Governor's budget address marked the start of a process. As we move forward, the Department is prepared to work with the Legislature to provide you with whatever guidance or information you will need to make informed decisions to ensure equity and excellence in education for all students. Again, I appreciate being given the opportunity to testify before you today, I look forward to working with you and the Governor this session, and while I may have more formal responses at a later date after I confer with my team, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.