

Education Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-1

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING TRANSPARENCY IN EDUCATION.

Vote Date: 3/24/2023

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/8/2023

File No.: 551

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REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill contains several provisions that would support transparency and accountability in education. To achieve this, it requires the State Department of Education (SDE) to review each school district's chart of accounts and report on certain funding information; requires school districts to satisfy existing requirements to file expenditures with SDE; and requires Regional Excellence Service Centers (RESCs), charter schools, and charter management organizations to file financial reports with SDE.

This bill also provides needed support for school boards of education and educators by requiring training developed by SDE for newly elected board members. Furthermore, with respect to teacher preparation programs, it removes the requirement for clinical, field, or

student teaching experience to be completed by working in each of two District Reference Groups (DRGs), thus easing roadblocks to teaching.

The bill additionally includes provisions related to supporting alliance districts and their students. These provisions include requiring FRCs to be established at every alliance district elementary school, authorizing SDE to designate additional alliance districts, and requiring SDE to provide grants to help cover the costs associated with the Pathways in Technology Early College High School Program.

Finally, this bill addresses the ongoing effort to promote good nutrition in school meals by banning certain products with lower nutritional value and requiring SDE to award grants to five alliance district school boards for hiring professional chefs to help build higher-quality meal programs.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

A previous version of the bill contained provisions that would have added comprehensive sex education that is age and developmentally appropriate, including the topic of affirmative consent, to the required public school program of instruction. The substitute language of the bill removes these sections (4-6) in response to concerns that it would reduce the flexibility of local or regional school boards to make determinations regarding the instruction of the subject matter.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

State Department of Education (SDE), Commissioner, Charlene Russell-Tucker; provides comments on each section of the bill. They express support for the provisions related to age and developmentally appropriate comprehensive sex education* and removing the teacher preparation program experience requirement. They state that Sections 1-3 create an unfunded mandate for SDE and school districts, as SDE already collects expenditure data from districts. They also express concern over current lack of resources and funding for provisions requiring SDE to provide training to new board of education members, expanding Alliance District designations, further expanding dual credit opportunities for high school students, and creating the Alliance District grant program for school meal programs. Additionally, they assert that the language concerning food product sale bans would greatly reduce meal options for students and increase costs for schools.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed the referenced provisions.*

Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), Child Advocate, Sarah Eagan; recommends that the bill be amended to include transparency and accountability requirements regarding SDE's monitoring and enforcing the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). They note that SDE does not currently publish any received complaints of IDEA noncompliance in districts, nor do they post the conclusions reached or corrective actions taken resulting from such complaints. They state that OCA has seen dramatic disparities and inequities in the providing of special education services to children, which is the number one concern that is brought to their office.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Connecticut General Assembly (CGA), Senate President Pro Tempore, Senator Martin Looney; supports this bill stating that it is a strategic combination of policies to improve the educational experiences of Connecticut children. They state that this bill would allow for more information on school and district spending to be made available to the public and legislature, support new board of education members with training developed by SDE, make teacher certification more accessible, and promote healthier eating and higher-quality meals in schools.

Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity (CWCSEO), Executive Director, Steven Hernández; submitted testimony in support of this bill.

Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE); supports this bill highlighting Sections 7 and 8, which require training for newly elected board of education members. They state that CABE will support SDE in providing this training and noted that they already offer instruction on important issues to members throughout the year. They question Section 1, which implements a uniform chart of accounts requirement for school districts. They express that this provision would be an unfunded mandate and necessitate additional work for the Superintendent and school business official staff.

Connecticut Education Association (CEA), President and Executive Director, Kate Dias and Donald Williams; supports this bill stating that the additional school financial reporting provision will help clarify how funds are allocated at the local level. However, they recommend allocating a significant portion of surplus funds toward addressing teacher shortages and increased student needs in school districts. Specifically, they advocate for additional funding to ensure better salaries for public school teachers, smaller class sizes, and improved school environments.

Connecticut Business and Industry Association (CBIA), Public Policy Associate, Ashley Zane; supports this bill highlighting Section 11 specifically, regarding pathways in technology early college high school programs in Alliance Districts. They suggest broadening the language in the section to include other successful models that bring career readiness instruction to students. They also recommend expanding this provision to include all school districts, should there be sufficient funding to do so.

Center for Children's Advocacy (CCA), Director of the Medical-Legal Partnership, Kathryn Scheinberg Meyer; supports this bill highlighting Sections 1, 7, and 8. However, they request adding a requirement for SDE to publish all complaints relating to special education, as well as any resulting investigative reports or corrective action updates. They state that without public access to these documents, the applicable school districts are unable to be held accountable. They also assert that publishing these documents would instruct other school districts on how SDE is applying the law and seeking remedies on various matters.

Branford Public Schools, Board of Education Member, John Prins; supports this bill highlighting the provisions that require training for newly elected board of education members. They emphasize the importance of a strong partnership and shared understanding between Boards of Education and Superintendents to ensuring quality education for students. They also suggest that this training requirement be expanded to include those members who are appointed to complete interim vacancies on Boards of Education as well.

Educators for Excellence, Executive Director, Daniel Pearson; supports this bill highlighting the provisions relating to school districts reporting their chart of accounts to SDE. They state that this transparency ensures that schools are using their funding appropriately and responsibly. They also note that it enables SDE to review this information to identify steps for more equitable school funding, as well as investment opportunities that lead to better student outcomes.

Education Reform Now CT (ERN CT), Executive Director, Amy Dowell; supports this bill highlighting the establishment of a uniform chart of accounts for school districts. They state that this provision enables equitable comparisons across the state that will help lawmakers identify how resources can best be allocated to maximize impact. They also express support for the training requirement for newly elected school board members. They emphasize the importance of their understanding matters of district-level budgeting and finance.

FaithActs for Education; several members of the organization submitted testimony in support of this bill. They state that it makes education spending more transparent, helping ensure that schools are funded fairly and are utilizing their allocated resources appropriately. They also highlight the provisions that require training for newly elected school board members.

ReadyCT, Executive Director, Shannon Marimón; supports this bill highlighting Section 11, which addresses pathways in technology early college high school programs in Alliance Districts. They recommend expanding the provision to include other successful models that provide career readiness and work-based learning instruction to students. They also suggest amended this language to include all school districts, instead of just Alliance Districts, within available appropriations.

Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence, Policy Manager, Bridget Koestner; supports this bill highlighting the provisions relating to the instruction of comprehensive sex education that is age and developmentally appropriate, including the topic of affirmative consent*. They state that knowledge of these concepts is a critical protective factor to preventing incidents of sexual harassment, assault, and abuse*. They also note that this education helps victims understand they are not at fault and how to access help and supportive resources accordingly*.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed the referenced provisions.*

Planned Parenthood of Southern New England (PPSNE), Senior Director of Education & Training, Liana Cunningham; supports this bill highlighting the provisions regarding the instruction of comprehensive sex education that is age and developmentally appropriate, including the topic of affirmative consent*. They state that Connecticut is one of only 12 states that have no sex education mandate*. They also cite research showing that this instruction leads to lower STI rates, fewer unintended pregnancies, better self-esteem, and healthier relationships as adults*.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed the referenced provisions.*

The following organizations jointly submitted testimony in support of this bill. They recommend that that the provisions implementing mandated training for newly elected school board members also include specific instruction on Connecticut expulsion law. They state

that under current law, board of education members may be tasked with conducting student expulsion hearings, making procedural determinations during this hearing, and issuing a final written decision. As such, they assert that school board members should better understand existing statute regarding this issue.

Connecticut Legal Services (CLS)

Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA)

New Haven Legal Assistance Association (NHLAA)

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Connecticut Association of School Business Officials (CASBO), Director of Government Affairs, David Lenihan; opposes this bill questioning Sections 1-3 specifically, which require school boards to adopt a uniform chart of accounts. They state that SDE's Education Financial System already collects the referenced data and makes it available on its EdSight website. They assert that changing the current system as the bill proposes would be expensive, time consuming, and non-productive. They also express their belief that this would result in another unfunded mandate at a time when school districts are addressing many other important priorities.

Connecticut Republican Assembly, President, Anne Manusky; opposes this bill stating that it does not address parent concerns regarding Common Core, critical race theory, social-emotional learning, or comprehensive sexuality education. They also assert that these concerns have contributed to declining enrollment in Connecticut public schools over the past decade.

Family Institute of Connecticut Action, President, Peter Wolfgang; opposes this bill stating that sex education is an issue for parents and school boards to determine, rather than state government*. They cite a recent study and state that comprehensive sex education has little evidence of effectiveness as compared to abstinence education*.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed the referenced provisions.*

Suffield Public Schools, Business Manager, Bill Hoff; opposes this bill stating that the current system for school districts to report their financial information through the Education Financial System is working well. They also note that the data reported is readily available to the public, enabling comparisons between school districts. As such, they assert that the proposed modifications are unnecessary.

Ten individuals submitted testimony anonymously in opposition to this bill.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF GENERAL COMMENT:

AFT Connecticut, Divisional Vice President, Mary Yordon; expresses support for the provisions in the bill enabling SDE to make each school board's chart of accounts available on its Internet web site. They note that having the ability to compare district budget elements would be very useful for their organization. They also state that this accessibility would help Connecticut taxpayers better understand how public funds are being utilized.

ConnCAN, Executive Director, Subira Gordon; recommends implementing a reporting requirement for school districts regarding the outcomes of any grant they receive. They state that this addition would ensure the public understands how these funds from their tax dollars specifically improved student outcomes.

Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), Executive Director, Fran Rabinowitz; expresses support for Sections 7 and 8 specifically, which mandate training for newly elected school board members. They state that this training requirement will lead to greater stability and effective governance for school districts.

Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM), State and Federal Relations Manager, Mike Muszynski; expresses support for Sections 1-3 specifically, which require school boards to adopt a uniform chart of accounts. They note that this will ensure consistency between general government and school boards, transparent financial accounting, and more effective municipal budgeting. They also state that it enables policy makers and school officials to make better informed decisions by analyzing data across school districts and identifying areas of efficiency or discrepancy.

Derby Public Schools, Superintendent, Matthew Conway; expresses concerns that requiring districts use their Alliance Funds to support the establishment of family resource centers (FRCs) will consume most, if not all, of these funds. They also state that the requirement to establish FRCs in each Alliance District elementary school creates logistical problems for districts, like Derby, who do not have the space to do so.

New Haven Federation of Teachers, President, Leslie Blatteau; expresses support for the additional school financial reporting provisions in the bill as to enable greater transparency. They also recommend including in this bill targeted allocations of surplus funds for school districts to address staffing shortages and the increased social and emotional needs of students.

School and State Finance Project, Executive Director, Lisa Hammersley; expresses support for the provisions in the bill requiring school boards to adopt a uniform chart of accounts. They note that this will significantly enhance transparency and enable better analysis of education funding across the state. They also express support for the provision removing the cap on how many districts can be included in the Alliance District program. They state that Alliance District designation criteria should be examined to create a threshold based upon outcomes, growth, and achievement.

Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut (SEEK), Legislative Chair, Andrew Feinstein; recommends that the proposed chart of accounts system be expanded further and designed by the Auditor of Public Accounts rather than SDE. They also state that a law is needed to explicitly delimit the role of school boards in Connecticut to ensure that they do not improperly exceed their authority. Finally, they suggest inclusions to the bill that would require SDE to release its policies and procedures regarding special education complaints, as well as require that all filed complaints are published.

Reported by: Rosalie Filippone & Taha Anwar

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