

SUMMARY

PREPARING STUDENTS TO ACHIEVE

Lawmakers have long recognized that an achievement gap exists because many students begin school less ready than others. As a result, the legislature created the School Readiness program and expanded full-day kindergarten. Although this was sound policy, it was too limited in scope. If we truly want to close the achievement gap, we cannot continue to delay expansions of high-quality, accredited early-childhood education programs. Connecticut has postponed this investment for too long. Everyone agrees that investing in early-childhood education will increase student achievement while reducing the future costs of governmental programs, including special education and child welfare.¹ A recent study found a return on investment in early education of 11 to 1.² It's simply time for lawmakers to act.

- **Ensure universal access to high-quality, preschool experiences**
The path to educational opportunity for all students in Connecticut begins before kindergarten. It is time to ensure that every child in Connecticut has a seat in an accredited preschool program.
- **Provide incentives for full-day kindergarten to extend the reach of early learning**
It is inherently unequal that parents and children in one town have access to full-day kindergarten when neighbors in another town do not. The state must end this inequity by creating incentives for all districts to provide parents and their children a full-day opportunity.
- **Upgrade certification requirements for preschool educators to enable them to deliver developmentally appropriate, knowledge-rich programs**
At a time when we are raising standards and requirements, we must set high-quality standards for early educators as well. It is time to raise our expectations and increase teaching standards at this crucial juncture in children's lives.
- **Develop and implement tutoring opportunities and extend student and teacher days, weeks, or year to ensure reading proficiency by the end of third grade**
One of the strongest factors in a child's likelihood to continue in school, and to do well, is literacy. Yet, when young children begin school without the basic building blocks to literacy, many never catch up. Connecticut needs to do more to ensure literacy by the end of third grade.

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REFORMING TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

Successful schools start with great teachers and effective leaders.

Connecticut must strengthen the shared responsibility for accountability while reforming how we recruit, prepare, evaluate, inspire, retain, and develop great teachers.

- **Improve accountability by reforming the teacher tenure and dismissal process to ensure fairness, effectiveness, and efficiency**

Connecticut lawmakers must resist misguided proposals that would permit arbitrary terminations of teachers who have not been adequately evaluated. In the unfortunate event that an evaluation system identifies a teacher to be ineffective, the dismissal process should be swift but also protect against unfair firings by providing a speedy hearing in front of a single impartial third party.

- **Select the best and most appropriate candidates for the teaching profession**

Lawmakers should establish a system for educators to identify, encourage, and recruit high-achieving students to pursue a career in teaching. New teachers should represent America's diversity, be encouraged to teach in underserved communities, and fill hard-to-staff curricular areas.

- **Improve educator preparation, evaluation, and professional development to advance teaching**

The state, in partnership with practitioners, is establishing guidelines for strong evaluations to be implemented at the local level. These should be strengthened by becoming law. The guidelines should recognize and require, among other things, that student growth and development are reflected in more than a test score. They should include multiple indicators of teacher effectiveness and ensure that improvement strategies are available to teachers to address any deficiencies identified in an evaluation. Lawmakers should also ensure that evaluators are highly skilled in conducting evaluations and are provided the time and resources necessary for doing it right.

- **Establish a Professional Standards Board for Educators to set high standards and strengthen accountability within the profession**

If Connecticut is to continue to compete in the world economy, it must provide educational policies worthy of its competition. Lawmakers must trust that educators, like other professionals, want to elevate their status by setting heightened standards for the teaching profession. Standards boards have accomplished this in other professions and other states. It is time to extend such professional recognition to educators in Connecticut.

SUMMARY

CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

There is mounting evidence showing that learning environments with a positive and safe school climate increase student achievement. A school climate that contributes to learning focuses on essential components, including safety and strong relationships between teachers and learners. Lawmakers should establish policies that promote better learning environments and build stronger relationships between teaching and learning.

■ Promote both a positive school climate and learning environment that provide safety and a culture of respect

- **Enhance anti-bullying tools** – The state legislature passed comprehensive bullying and cyberbullying legislation in 2011. This serves as a strong building block toward a more comprehensive school-wide anti-bullying effort that can promote better learning environments throughout schools. Lawmakers should remain focused on ways to implement laws to prevent and address bullying.
- **Address the troubling and growing trend of disrespect and violence against teachers** – Increasingly frequent and pervasive violence toward teachers is a growing concern. The key to reversing this trend is in attention and prevention. Disrespect leads to violence, and lawmakers must ensure that any violent behavior against a teacher—or anyone else in a school—does not get swept under the rug. Doing so sends the wrong signal to students that violence is tolerated.
- **Expand the use of school climate surveys to enhance the learning environment** – Following the example of North Carolina, the Connecticut State Department of Education should develop school climate surveys and extend their use to all Connecticut schools, especially low-performing schools, and provide resources for addressing the results in school improvement plans.

■ Build stronger relationships between teaching and learning

- **Foster research-based school transformation** – Many Connecticut schools are successfully reforming, and lawmakers should recognize models, such as CommPACT, that have proven successful and that can be replicated in other neighborhood schools to improve student outcomes.
- **Expand the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI)** – Connecticut has already invested in the successful CALI improvement strategy. CALI has boosted student achievement by strengthening teachers' skills in world-class, research-based, data-driven instruction and quality interventions. It has helped to narrow the achievement gap in many schools in need of improvement. CALI has been a wise investment that should not be wasted. Its reach should be expanded to more schools in more districts.
- **Establish strategies to showcase and disseminate best practices for public, CommPACT, charter, vocational-agriculture, vocational-technical, and magnet schools across the state** – Our public, magnet, charter, vo-ag, vo-tech, and CommPACT schools should serve as laboratories of reform. In too many cases, however, successful practices developed in one school to narrow the achievement gap are not readily shared with other schools. This is unproductive. Lawmakers should consider strategies to showcase and disseminate best practices to inspire innovation and creativity in other schools.

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ENCOURAGING PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The school door should not serve as a barrier between parents and the expectations placed on their children in the classroom. There needs to be greater connectedness between the world of school and the world at home. Lawmakers should support policies that enhance communication between the two with the goal of increasing participation of all parents in their children's education.

- **Provide the services and social/health supports that children and families need under the school roof**
Public schooling in Connecticut must be about more than simply what happens in the classroom. It must also be about the daily needs of students and their access to health care services, community supports, and other “wraparound” resources that are enriching to the mind, body, and readiness for learning.
- **Promote incentives for employers to provide time for parents to participate in school-day activities**
As Governor Dannel P. Malloy has said, when parents are engaged in their children's education, children do better. But for working parents, getting time off from the job to visit their child's school can be difficult. Lawmakers should join other states in enacting legislation providing workplace leave time to parents so that they can participate in school-time activities with their kids.
- **Develop a challenge grant that would promote collaboration between parents and teachers**
In some districts across the state, teachers and administrators are creating innovative and inexpensive ways to increase parental involvement. With a little investment, the state could administer a challenge grant to do even more.
- **Provide training for School Governance Councils that promotes cultural awareness and respect**
Lawmakers should consider expanding school governance training to all stakeholders. Training must enhance cultural awareness, build trust, and promote a respectful learning environment.

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ENSURING THE FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

If Connecticut is truly going to provide substantially equal educational opportunity and continually enhance its economic competitiveness, it is incumbent on the state to meet its financial commitment to adequately, equitably, and fully fund its schools.

- **Increase state funding of local education expenses**
This needs to be done equitably and by targeting a portion of additional resources toward meeting and sustaining smaller class size goals.
- **Increase the per-pupil grant (also known as the “foundation”) level**
The foundation must reflect the real cost of adequately educating students and index the amount to adjust for changing costs over time.
- **Use more current and accurate town and household wealth data**
Connecticut’s school funding formula has relied on census data, some of which is no longer collected and all of which is quickly out-of-date. Lawmakers can and should correct this by using more current data collected by state and federal agencies.
- **More accurately measure student poverty**
While there is no perfect measure of poverty and its impact on learning, the most representative variable is free and reduced-price meal eligibility.
- **End arbitrary grant allocations**
In the absence of full funding for the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant, use a scheduled phase-in approach to increase funding over time rather than imposing freezes or other arbitrary limits on funding changes.
- **More fairly share special education costs**
Connecticut lawmakers must recognize that the responsibility for funding special education ultimately falls to the state, particularly for children whose education costs exceed local per-pupil expenditures. Lawmakers should work toward ensuring that the state shares more of the costs of special education that greatly exceed local per-pupil expenditures.