



Independent research and advocacy to improve the lives of Connecticut's children

Providing Educational Opportunity for Every Child

**Candidate Briefing
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A free, equal public education is the right of every child. A quality public education system should provide a well-rounded, balanced curriculum and help prepare children for their adult lives. While Connecticut has a strong public education system, we need better ways to assess our children's learning and the work that schools perform.

Connecticut is one of the highest scoring states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In 2012, 74.5% of all third graders taking the standard Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) in reading scored at the level "proficient" (level 3 of 5) while in math, 85.8% of third-graders scored at or above "proficient." That same year, 86.2% of eighth graders taking the standard CMT in reading were at or above "proficient" while in math, 87.1% of students were at or above "proficient." And the state's indicator of improvement over time (vertical scales) shows all groups of students, starting in third grade, making comparable growth (as measured by the standard CMT) in math and reading.



However, by third grade we already see significant disparities in achievement between minority and low-income children and their white, more affluent peers, as measured by both the NAEP and the CMT. Though students make comparable growth in test scores thereafter, that socioeconomic gap continues to persist.

Reducing racial and economic isolation in Connecticut is vital to our shared future.

Because Connecticut has such intense residential segregation by race and income, and because the school a child attends is frequently determined by where he lives, lower-income children tend to be concentrated in particular schools. Because schools are funded in part by local property taxes, those particular schools are also the schools that have access to the fewest resources.

Test-score disparities on the NAEP between racial and ethnic minorities and white children decreased in the 1970s and early 1980s, partly due to improvements in opportunity and reduction of the isolation of racial and ethnic minorities. Efforts to reduce racial and economic isolation should be part of our approach to provide an equal public education.

Keeping children in school should be a top priority. Too many Connecticut children lose educational opportunities because of truancy and out-of-school suspensions. Although reliable statewide truancy data is not yet available, preliminary data indicate that the truancy problem in many districts is severe. Reducing out-of-school suspensions is also essential to keeping students involved and engaged in their schools. Nearly 60% of all out-of-school suspensions in Connecticut in 2006-2007 were for "school policy" violations, such as attendance violations and disrespect. These low-level infractions are insufficient to warrant out-of-school suspensions and result in lost instructional time.

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Connecticut must also address the high rates of dropout among low-income and minority students. While Connecticut has one of the highest four-year graduation rates in the country (81.8% in 2010), only 62.7% of low-income students and 64% of Latino students in the 2010 senior cohort graduated in four years.

Connecticut must invest sufficient resources to ensure all children receive a high-quality education, whatever their needs. In particular, Connecticut must make concerted investments in educating children that might struggle in school, including children in high-poverty areas of our state, children that know multiple languages and are labeled as English Language Learners (ELL), and children with disabilities that need additional support or accommodations. The Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant is the leading mechanism in Connecticut that accounts for these needs and increases school funding equity. The funding for the ECS grant did not increase between Fiscal Years 2010 and 2012. In 2013, additional ECS funding will be offered under the condition of implementing particular policies. The flat and conditional funding of the ECS disadvantages less affluent districts that are not able to increase tax revenues for public schools.

To improve and broaden educational opportunities, Connecticut policymakers should adopt several approaches:

1) Public education should support a broad set of goals for children's development and well-being.

The state's educational system should continue to provide a broad educational program that serves all children's learning and developmental needs including academic skills, critical thinking, the arts and literature, preparation for skilled work, social skills, citizenship, and emotional health.

2) Use a variety of methods and indicators, in addition to standardized tests, to assess whether children receive a quality education.

For example, new methods should include the use of classroom-based assessment of children's learning such as local tests, essays, projects, performances, or presentations. In addition to these classroom-based assessments and diagnostic tests, schools can be reviewed with qualitative information observed in schools by experts or participants.

3) Require schools to adopt initiatives that promote a positive school climate and to regularly report

on their suspension, truancy and attrition rates.

School districts should collect and report accurate data on suspension, truancy, and attrition in high school. In addition, they should be encouraged to discontinue or substantially revise policies that "push out" students, such as exclusionary discipline. Further, particular focus and attention should be paid to the importance of skills developed in pre-adolescence, building relationships between children, families, and staff/faculty; the flexibility of schools to develop engaging, supportive programs for struggling students; and opportunities for employment and post-secondary education that are open to adolescents.

4) The ECS funding must keep pace with students' need in the coming years.

In addition, the formula must be revisited to ensure that it uses accurate and up-to-date measures and data for key variables such as poverty, income, and the educational needs of children that need more support. Particular effort should be made to accurately account for the state funds spent on public education in addition to the amount that is spent by towns.

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