



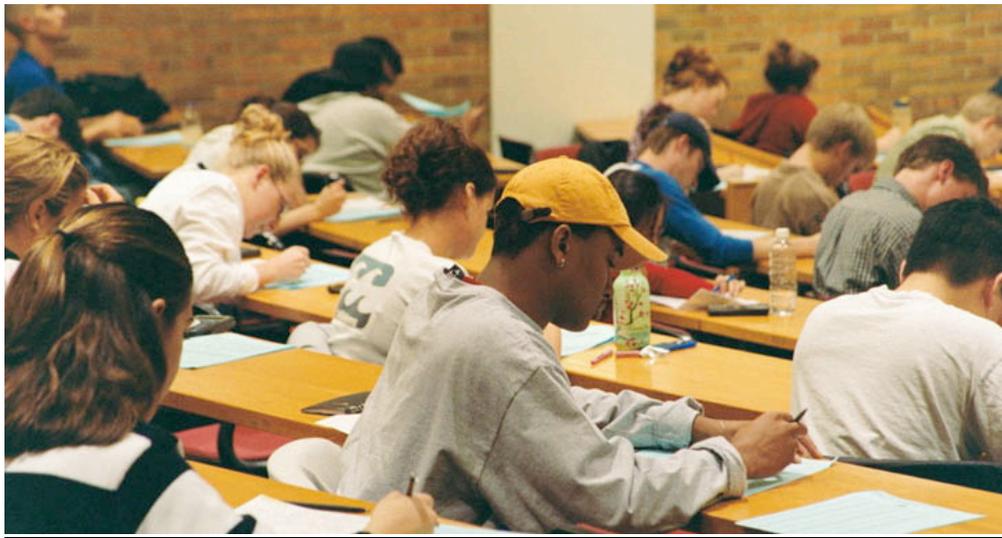
THE CONNECTICUT POLICY INSTITUTE

A non-partisan, not-for-profit research organization dedicated to developing responsible, research driven public policy for Connecticut.

Reforming Connecticut's Schools

-“The Four Big Things”-

March 5, 2012



Written by the staff of the Connecticut Policy Institute. We are grateful for the contributions of a number of education experts and education focused organizations in Connecticut and states at the forefront of education reform.

Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary.....2

II. “The Four Big Things”.....3

III. “The Four Big Things” in More Detail.....4

Improve Transparency and Introduce an A-F School Grading System.....4

Create a Framework for Obtaining the Highest Quality Teaching Possible.....5

Require Public School Choice in Connecticut’s Worst Performing Districts.....9

Require a Reading Exam for Third Graders and a Regents-Style Exam to Graduate from High School.....10

IV. A Connecticut Plan of Action.....12

Executive Summary

Some problems are so big, so multi-faceted and complex, that even conceiving solutions can seem an impossible challenge. Imagine an adult version of the child's dilemma when her room gets so messy she doesn't even know where to start cleaning-up – so she doesn't until an adult intervenes. Connecticut's messiest room may be its underperforming pre-K through 12 public schools.

Connecticut has the largest achievement gap in the country. The only changes to the system in more than a generation amount to tinkering at the edges – a few more seats in charter schools, allowing a small number of alternatively certified teachers into Connecticut classrooms, and tweaking the incomprehensible Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) formula. Significant reform has eluded us despite notable progress in Massachusetts, Florida, Colorado, and other states.

Education reform should be easy because, unlike most policy challenges, there is almost universal agreement on the policy goal of making our schools as good as they can be. When was the last time you heard someone say he or she didn't think young people should have a good education or that it wasn't a public responsibility? In many areas, policy arguments involve a disagreement over goals and priorities, not methods. Although there is plenty of disagreement about how to improve our schools, at least in the area of education, there is little disagreement over goals. So why has so little been done?

The states that have made the most progress have had leadership committed to education reform - Governor Bill Weld in Massachusetts, Governor Jeb Bush in Florida, Governor Bill Ritter in Colorado, Governor Mitch Daniels in Indiana, and Governor Jack Markell in Delaware. Until last fall, no Connecticut governor in a generation has even mentioned education reform as a top priority, much less made a serious effort to place it high on the agenda. We commend Governor Malloy for saying he is serious about education reform and hope that his strong rhetoric results in equally strong action.

Despite the interest of numerous national and state organizations, governor's commissions, and passionate individuals committed to improving underperforming schools, Connecticut's education reform efforts have been limited to single issue advocacy (more charter schools, for example) or laundry lists of initiatives that articulate problems, but do not offer actionable solutions. Every description of education reform reliably notes that teacher quality has the highest correlation with student outcomes and so the inevitable recommendation – “we must improve teacher quality.” Fine. But how, when, where?

This paper hopes to break through these impediments by employing simple problem-solving tools. First, dispense with the laundry lists and focus instead on the few things

that are both achievable and will have the most significant impact. Second, articulate a clear roadmap and action plan for policy-makers, executives, and legislators to implement the recommended reforms.

Towards that end, this paper focuses exclusively on “The Four Big Things” that Connecticut must do to improve its underperforming schools. The paper is intentionally not an exhaustive list. There are many other things Connecticut can do that will help, but any reform initiative that does not achieve these “Four Big Things” will be far short of what can be done to improve our schools and will shortchange Connecticut children.

We support many of the ideas included in Governor Malloy’s education reform proposal. But, as this paper will discuss, the Governor’s current proposal comes up short on concrete actions that will substantively improve our schools. The proposed bill’s 150+ page length, piecemeal release to the press, sometimes confusing language, and lack of a clarifying structure remind us of legislative initiatives that have more politics in mind than substantive change and are crafted and promoted to sound bolder than they are.

We hope that by providing a focus on the actions that will make the biggest difference and providing a clear roadmap for policymakers and legislators, we can help foster a strong impetus for action that results in meaningful reform.

“The Four Big Things”

The Connecticut Policy Institute contacted organizations and individuals involved in education reform around the country. From these discussions, we have focused on “The Four Big Things” that Connecticut could do right now that would have a significant positive impact on the state’s worst performing schools. All four have been implemented elsewhere and proven effective. All four are fundamental reforms, clear, and none is a budget buster. They are:

1. Improve transparency relating to schools, teachers, and student performance by introducing a statewide longitudinal data collection system and an A through F grading system for all pre-K through 12 public schools.
2. Increase the talent pipeline for teachers and administrators by improving the attractiveness of the profession, the quality of preparation, and focusing on teacher effectiveness. To achieve these, Connecticut must open alternative routes for certification and base promotions, compensation, and terminations on teacher effectiveness rather than exclusively on graduate degrees and “time on the job.”
3. Improve accountability for school performance by allowing public school choice for parents of children in Connecticut’s five worst performing school districts that do not yet offer sufficient choice and adopting a “money follows the child” funding system with variable grants based on a child’s needs.

4. Assure that no one slips through the cracks by requiring that third graders pass a reading test before being allowed to go on to fourth grade and that high school students pass a regents-style exam before graduating.

“The Four Big Things” in More Detail

1. Improve Transparency and Introduce an A-F School Grading System

Most education reform proposals include mechanisms to “turn-around” underperforming schools. This cannot be done when, as in Connecticut, there is no standard definition of school performance and no way to measure it.

Several private organizations in Connecticut put out school “scorecards” and other assessments of school performance. But Connecticut needs a statewide longitudinal data system¹ and an A-F school grading system that allow parents, administrators, and the government to track student, teacher, and school performance. Only when this information is publicly available is it possible to determine when students, teachers, and schools are underperforming and appropriate corrective action can be taken.

Effective organizations have clear performance goals and a means for measuring performance against those goals. Connecticut schools cannot currently measure their performance against other schools or a common performance standard. While a school grading system will never be perfect, an imperfect grading system is better than no grading system. A grading scale of A-F might leave out some nuance and detail, but it is a scale that everyone, especially parents, can easily understand.

Florida, Massachusetts, and Colorado long ago introduced statewide longitudinal data collection and school grading with notable success. Florida may be the best example because Florida started out with a public school system performing far more poorly than those in Massachusetts and Colorado. Since implementing school grading in 1999, Florida has seen major improvements in the performance of its low-income and minority students.²

Florida’s longitudinal data collection system is called the Educational Data Warehouse (EDW). EDW provides comparable school performance data permitting grading of schools on an A-F scale. With a grade for each school, educators can compare relative performance of schools and can make informed decisions about which schools need more attention or additional resources. School grades in Florida were initially based solely on the performance of the students, one half on proficiency and the other half on progress. The progress score of the lowest performing 25% of the class is double weighted to

¹ See <http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/stateanalysis/states/CT/>.

² See Foundation for Excellence in Education, “Florida Formula for Student Achievement: Lessons for the Nation,” 2011; Foundation for Excellence in Education, “Florida’s Education Revolution,” 2011.

emphasize the importance of improving the proficiency of the worst performing students. In 2009, Florida expanded its school grading system to include other factors such as graduation rates and college preparedness.³

Florida's school grading system has proven very effective. In 1999, the first year of the grading system, 28% of Florida's schools were considered D or F schools, 51% were C schools, and the remaining 21% were A and B schools. In 2010, after eleven years of improvement with the new data system and incentives, the percentage of A and B schools dramatically increased, even as the grading standards were slowly ratcheted up. By then, only 7% of the schools received a D or F grade, 19% were considered C schools, and 74% were deemed A or B schools.⁴ Because of Florida's success, other states and New York City have followed their lead with similarly good results.⁵ Connecticut should do the same.

An A-F grading system cannot be implemented without a statewide longitudinal data collection system to provide the input. To implement this recommendation, the State Commissioner of Education should authorize and implement a statewide longitudinal data collection system based on Florida's model and require that school districts transition to the new system over two years. The estimated cost in Connecticut of a statewide longitudinal data collection system is \$10 million annually for two years and less after that.⁶ Connecticut's cost would be lower because there is federal assistance available under the Statewide Longitudinal System Grant Program. The Governor should provide these funds in his budget and seek approval of the legislature. The State Commissioner of Education should then implement an A-F grading system based on other states' models, but modified for Connecticut following a public review process.

2. Create a Framework for Obtaining the Highest Quality Teaching Possible

Studies reliably show teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor affecting student performance. But attracting, developing, and retaining top teachers is not that easy. In Connecticut, many impediments lie in the way. Overly restrictive teacher certification requirements, "time on the job"-based pay and promotions, and "last in, first out" cut-back policies (all designed to protect teachers' pay and jobs regardless of performance) are not only legislatively and contractually embedded policies in Connecticut, but reflect culturally embedded attitudes in most Connecticut public school

³ Foundation for Excellence in Education, "Florida Formula for Student Achievement: Lessons for the Nation," 2011.

⁴ Foundation for Excellence in Education, "Florida's Education Revolution," 2011.

⁵ See, for example, New York City Department of Education, "Chancellor Walcott Releases 2011 Progress Reports for Schools Serving Students in Grades K-8," September 2011, <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2011-2012/emsprogressreportsrelease92311.htm>.

⁶ This estimation is based on the implementation costs in other states. It does not constitute a CPI budgetary forecast.

systems. These policies discourage and often turn-off young, talented teachers while keeping others from entering the profession.

One approach to raising quality is to raise the qualifications requirements of those seeking to enter the profession. Governor Malloy's proposal does this by raising college grade requirements for teachers. But under our current certification criteria this will mean fewer teachers are available if the pool of applicants is not also broadened. Requiring a degree in education, for example, means that many talented people who didn't decide to become teachers until after completing their educations are not able to become teachers. Research shows that *removing* barriers to entry for potential teachers who are qualified is more important to improving the quality of teachers than raising qualification thresholds.⁷ While requiring teachers to have a bachelor's degree and a minimum college GPA is sound policy, Connecticut must otherwise change the state's antiquated and rigid teacher certification system to broaden the pool from which talented individuals can become teachers.

Connecticut took a step in the direction of alternative routes to teacher certification in 2005 when it allowed a small number of teachers to be certified without the education credentials and tenure otherwise required in Connecticut. This allowed a small number of Teach for America teachers into Connecticut classrooms. Connecticut should expand alternative routes to certification. New Jersey, South Carolina, and Florida long ago liberalized teacher certification rules with very good results. All three states focused initially on addressing teacher shortages, but their plans also substantially improved teacher quality.

New Jersey began alternative routes to certification in the 1980's. Now nearly 40 percent of New Jersey's new teachers are certified through their "Alternate Route Program."⁸ South Carolina has its Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE), which was created under the 1984 Education Improvement Act. It was designed to help individuals who already have an education degree, but do not meet other certification requirements.⁹ Florida opened-up alternative routes for teacher certification a decade ago and policymakers there agree it has been an important contributor to the formidable progress Florida has made since then in student performance. Today more than half of Florida's new teachers become certified through alternative routes rather than beginning with a degree in education.¹⁰

Alternative routes to certification do not just open up the pipeline for new teachers. They also allow educators to compare the effectiveness of different preparation methods. Some believe Connecticut's single track to certification has allowed ossification of the teacher preparation curriculum and training process. Others are concerned that having a

⁷ Robert Gordon et al, *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job*, Brookings Institute (2006);

⁸ See National Center for Alternative Certification, <http://www.teach-now.org/intro.cfm>.

⁹ See South Carolina Department of Education, PACE process for certification, <http://www.scteachers.org/Cert/pace/process.cfm>.

¹⁰ Tim R. Hass, *Certification Requirements and Teacher Quality: A Comparison of Alternative Routes to Teaching*, George State University Department of Economics (2011).

single-track system results in all new Connecticut teachers being subjected to the same education dogma that has helped get us where we are. Connecticut should draw from the alternative certification legislation used in Florida, New Jersey, and South Carolina, among others, to immediately adopt and implement its own liberal, multi-track teacher certification process.

Connecticut must also create a promotion and incentive structure to reward excellent teachers. Connecticut's teachers are stuck in an industrial, fifties-style pay, promotion, and termination framework that serves a single goal – job security based on “time on the job.” While job security for teachers is a worthy goal, other goals are equally as important – for example, obtaining excellent performance from teachers and weeding out teachers who do not meet minimum performance standards. Connecticut's out-of-date system protects poor performers, does not reward or encourage excellence, and drives away many of the most talented. Children pay the price.

The current version of Governor Malloy's education reform proposal includes a modest step in that direction. It proposes an early link between teacher performance and promotion by tying teacher tenure to performance. We commend the governor for introducing this measure. We hope that it remains in the final version of the bill and is faithfully implemented.

Under the governor's proposed reform, teachers would need two “exemplary” evaluations to be eligible for tenure (granted 2-4 years into their career). Once they receive tenure, teachers could still be removed if they receive the lowest possible evaluation rating for two consecutive years.

We are concerned that these evaluations will be ineffective without a statewide longitudinal data-system to provide consistent and reliable performance data and an A-F school grading system that incentivizes principals and superintendents to evaluate teachers rigorously. Further, Connecticut must make teaching more attractive to the most talented by linking compensation to performance and eliminating “last-in first-out” cutback policies. The current draft bill does neither. Although politically unpopular among some interest groups, Florida, Colorado, Indiana, and other states have implemented these reforms and demonstrated their effectiveness.¹¹ Connecticut should follow the lead of these states.

We have not heard about anyone going into teaching “for the money.” But when good work goes unrecognized and unrewarded, even teachers become disillusioned and sometimes leave the profession. Some education policy experts are skeptical of teacher incentives that are too heavily weighted on performance, but even they believe that some performance-based factor is a critical component of an effective teacher compensation,

¹¹ For instance, see Benjamin DeGrow, *Pioneering Teacher Compensation Reform: K-12 Educator Pay Innovation in Colorado*, Education Policy Center (March 2011).

termination, and professional development system. Connecticut has no performance-based factor in its seniority and compensation system.¹²

3. Require Public School Choice in Connecticut's Worst Performing Districts

School choice is controversial and politically sensitive. But in large, geographically concentrated school districts where some schools are performing poorly, public school choice has proven effective at improving student and school performance. When Hartford introduced public school choice in 2006, the high school graduation rate was 29 percent and the third-grade reading level was 23 percent. In 2011, the high school graduation rate rose to 52 percent and third-grade reading level rose to 53 percent. According to former Hartford Superintendent of Schools Steven Adamowski, the choice program has been a critical contributor to Hartford's significant improvement in student and school performance.¹³

Some of the controversy around public school choice results from misunderstanding. The school choice we are advocating is limited only to public schools and only to school districts that are seriously underperforming, realizing that adoption of a broader policy on school choice in Connecticut is unrealistic at this time.

Public school choice brings to the public education system the healthy dynamic of a marketplace where parents and students (the "customers" of public education), rather than administrators (the "management"), decide which schools are performing well. The marketplace puts competitive pressure on schools and teachers to perform and serves as a catalyst for positive reforms at the district level.

Connecticut's five worst performing school districts that have not already implemented broad public school choice should be required by the state to do so. They are: Bridgeport, Waterbury, Windham, New Britain, and New London. Hartford and New Haven are among the seven worst performing districts, but they have already implemented public school choice.

Several states including Illinois, Indiana, Florida, and Massachusetts have mandated choice when underperforming school districts failed to adopt it on their own. The programs in Illinois and Massachusetts, implemented under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 ('NCLB'), provide useful illustrations of how choice can be instituted through state-level legislation.

Illinois provides a Public School Choice option to students and their families if the school they are attending does not make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years. If the school does not meet these standards, the school notifies the families who then have

¹² See, for instance, Susan Moore Johnson & John P. Papay, *Redesigning Teacher Pay: A System for the Next Generation of Educators*, Economic Policy Institute (2009).

¹³ See Ann-Marie Adams, "Steve Adamowski Leaves Lasting Impact," *Hartford Guardian* (July 20, 2011).

the option to pick another in-district school for the following year. Not all schools have openings, so if there are a limited number of spots for transfers the lowest achieving students from low-income families are given priority. If a child decides to switch schools within the district, the district pays for their transportation.

Massachusetts follows the same general guidelines as Illinois under NCLB, with two notable differences. In Massachusetts, parents, not districts, are responsible for a child's transportation to an alternative school. Also schools can opt out of the program.

School choice is a critical component of educational reform, but it does not work well without a reliable and usable school grading system to inform parent choices, as also recommended in this paper. School choice is also not fiscally sustainable without a means for allocating resources to schools based on the number and needs of students. So Connecticut, in addition to implementing public school choice, must implement a "money follows the child" funding system with variable grants based on a child's needs. Hartford has its own within district "money follows the child" system, which could serve as a model for other districts implementing choice.

One concern about "money follows the child" and school choice is that as students choose to leave underperforming schools, schools may be left with the most challenging and expensive students to educate, resulting in even poorer statistical performance.

To address this potential effect of choice, we advocate a variable grant funding system based on a student's needs. Special needs students, for example, would receive a larger grant than more highly functioning, less expensive to educate students. "Money follows the child" is much simpler when the money remains in the same school district. Focusing new public school choice programs on within-district choice would lose some of choice's positive effects, but it would be a very large step in the right direction and would avoid one of the biggest complications and opposition to choice.

Other concerns about school choice include two difficult transitions after choice takes effect. The first is a "fear of the unknown" as underperforming schools are downsized or shut down, and students, parents, and teachers, lose a flawed, but familiar, school. The second is when the number of good alternatives to an underperforming school is limited. But over time, choice is a catalyst that creates more good alternatives by putting pressure on school boards and providing new resources to schools that parents are choosing in favor of underperforming schools. Early on, before the effects of choice are in place, in many districts there may be few good alternatives to underperforming schools. So new options should be introduced before underperforming schools are shut down.

4. Require a Reading Exam for Third Graders and a Regents-Style Exam to Graduate from High School

Pre-K through third grade is critical to the development of a child's reading ability. Before fourth grade, children "learn to read" and from fourth grade on, they "read to

learn.” If children can’t read above a minimum standard by fourth grade, they won’t learn and are at much higher risk of not graduating from high school.¹⁴

This is a serious problem for Connecticut. The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam found that 27% of all Connecticut 4th graders scored “Below Basic” on 3rd grade reading, equivalent to functional illiteracy. Among low-income children, 49 percent scored “Below Basic.”¹⁵ Third graders should be required to pass a reading test before moving to fourth grade. If they can’t pass the test they should, with limited exceptions, be required to repeat third grade and receive remedial reading instruction.

Florida and New York have introduced policies on social promotion that have been very successful. In 2006, 29,000 Florida third graders failed the reading portion of the FCAT test. Some were held back, while others were given exemptions. Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters from the Manhattan Institute did a study on the progress of students who failed and were held back versus students who failed but were given an exemption and students who barely passed. They found that the students who failed and were held back were more successful long term because they were able to catch up once they learned how to read. The other students continued to struggle and they progressively fell farther behind because of their poor reading skills.¹⁶

In order to determine which children do not meet an appropriate minimum reading standard, Florida uses the FCAT test. Students are graded based on five levels of achievement. If a child scores the lowest of the five levels, he or she is considered “functionally illiterate.” When a child scores at the lowest level, he or she is given the opportunity to prove their reading skills through a different standardized reading outcome assessment or a test-based portfolio. If the child still does not meet expectations, he or she is held back in the third grade for a year of intensive reading intervention. The first year Florida did this, there was a 13 percent retention rate. While this caused controversy,¹⁷ something had to be done to fix a 29 percent “functionally illiterate” rate. Within a couple of years, the retention policy combined with reading instruction and intervention in grades K-3 resulted in the number scoring “functionally illiterate” to decline sharply.¹⁸

Connecticut also has no exam to prove a minimum level of skills and knowledge prior to graduation from high school.¹⁹ Too many Connecticut students graduate from high school without sufficient skills to meet the expectations of employers for high school graduates.

¹⁴ Annie E. Casey Foundation, *2010 KIDS COUNT Special Report: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* (2010).

¹⁵ See The Nation’s Report Card, Reading: 2011 State Snapshot Report for Connecticut, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2011/2012454CT4.pdf>.

¹⁶ Jay Greene and Marcus Winters, “Revisiting Grade Retention: An Evaluation of Florida’s Test-Based Promotion Policy,” *Education Finance and Policy*, Fall 2007.

¹⁷ There is research suggesting that retention, alone, does not improve student outcomes. The key to Florida’s success is that retention was combined with intervention for students who were held back.

¹⁸ Data courtesy of the Foundation on Excellence in Education.

¹⁹ The last year Connecticut children are systematically assessed is tenth grade.

This lack of a graduation standard erodes the credibility of a Connecticut high school diploma and creates bad experiences for both employers and employees. Many Connecticut high school students simply cruise through the last years of high school knowing that they will not have to pass a test to graduate. Connecticut should adopt a regents-style exam similar to the one used in New York State to assure that high school graduates have the minimum skills expected of high school graduates and to keep the pressure on high school students, teachers, and administrators to continue learning right up to graduation.

A Connecticut Plan of Action

If Connecticut is serious about education reform, here is a high impact, low cost, eight-step action plan derived from “The Four Big Things” for achieving most of the performance improvements that have been achieved by other states:

1. The State Commissioner of Education should authorize and implement a statewide longitudinal data collection system and require that school districts transition to the new system over two years. The Governor should provide the funds for the system.
2. The State Commissioner of Education should implement an A-F school grading system modified for Connecticut following a public review process.
3. The Governor should propose and seek passage of legislation liberally authorizing alternative routes to teacher certification.
4. The Governor should convert teacher contracts to base seniority and retention at least 50 percent on teacher effectiveness, allow districts to link effectiveness to compensation, and eliminate “last in, first out” cut-back policies.
5. The Governor should negotiate with the five worst performing school districts that do not have broad public school choice to introduce locally tailored public school choice. If he is unable to negotiate an acceptable choice policy in these districts, he should mandate one.
6. The Governor should propose and negotiate passage of legislation directing that state education funding “follow the child” and provide a variable grant amount based on a student’s needs.
7. The State Commissioner of Education should require a third grade reading test and an action protocol for those unable to demonstrate reading proficiency appropriate for moving-on to fourth grade.

8. The State Commissioner of Education should take the actions necessary to implement a “regents-style” exam requirement for graduation from a Connecticut high school.

If Connecticut were able to implement these eight clear action items, the most important opportunities for improving Connecticut’s pre-K through 12 public education system would be underway. The many other changes that have less impact or are more controversial can wait for more results from other states and/or more public debate. But these eight are too important and too certain to deliver positive results to wait any longer.

Policymakers, legislators, and concerned citizens can learn quickly what has been done in other states by referencing the following links:

1. Florida Statutes - http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Index&Title_Request=XLVIII#TitleXLVIII
2. Massachusetts Statutes - <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/statelaws.html>
3. Indiana Statutes - <http://www.doe.in.gov/idoec/putting-students-first/putting-students-first> or <http://www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code/title20/>
4. Colorado - http://www.cde.state.co.us/index_law.htm

Those serious about improving student performance and educational outcomes in Connecticut cannot be anything but advocates for these reforms. We hope that in the Governor’s “Year for Education” these reforms, at a minimum, will be part of what he chooses to fight for and what he and the legislature are able to achieve.