

A photograph of a classroom scene. A female teacher with dark hair, wearing a light green cardigan over a dark top, is leaning over a wooden desk. She is holding a pen and pointing at a notebook on the desk. A young girl with red hair in pigtails, wearing glasses and a denim jacket, is sitting at the desk and looking down at the notebook. In the foreground, the back of a boy's head and shoulders are visible, out of focus. Other students are visible in the background, also working at their desks. The room has large windows in the background, letting in natural light.

A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

PROVEN IDEAS FOR
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



CONNECTICUT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION • JANUARY 2012

A View from the Classroom: Proven Ideas for Student Achievement is a comprehensive education reform plan developed by teachers that includes changing the teacher evaluation process and replacing tenure with a streamlined dismissal process for underperforming teachers.

Without question, there's no greater asset to improving public schools than high-quality teachers. Teachers are in the classroom every day; they know what is needed to prepare students for the economic challenges ahead.

A View from the Classroom: Proven Ideas for Student Achievement proposes specific ideas that can make a real difference to improve education for Connecticut students.

The plan focuses on shared accountability including teachers and the larger community to close the achievement gap by

- Preparing Students to Achieve
- Reforming Teacher Accountability through Development and Evaluation
- Creating a Positive Learning Environment
- Encouraging Parental and Community Participation
- Ensuring the Fair Distribution of Resources

Connecticut cannot build a strong local economy unless it provides high-quality education, and the state cannot have high-quality schools without adequate funding, small class sizes, and the involvement of parents and communities to transform local schools that need help. Teachers will do their part, as this plan proposes creating an evaluation system for educators that uses multiple indicators of quality teaching and developing a streamlined dismissal process to remove underperforming teachers.

Teachers lead classrooms, and their voice is necessary to ensure meaningful education reform. Please read this document carefully as educators look forward to engaging in a positive, collaborative dialogue with lawmakers, parents, and everyone who's interested in improving the quality of our public schools and preparing our students for tomorrow's challenges.



A hand in a white sleeve points towards a whiteboard. The whiteboard has faint, light-colored diagrams or sketches on it, including what looks like a flowchart or a network diagram. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue and white.

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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.

SUMMARY

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.

SUMMARY

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.

SUMMARY

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.



A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Preparing students to achieve



Preparing Students to Achieve

Connecticut, like the rest of the nation, faces the critical challenge of closing the achievement gap. The achievement gap is about a continual struggle for economic opportunity and justice that is centuries old. Connecticut teachers stand, as they long have, as advocates for a just society—one where equal opportunity exists for all. They believe that educational opportunity is the path to such a society. And they share with lawmakers a commitment to ensure that Connecticut schools continually improve in order to reach a just society.

It's time to confront the hard fact that Connecticut cannot realistically expect to narrow the achievement gap without addressing the readiness gap. Student readiness is perhaps the most significant factor impacting the gap. Research has pointed out that when preschool children interact with more adults, they have a fuller understanding of the world. Those who have been taught their colors, letters, and numbers have advantages over those who haven't begun that process until they first set foot in a public school. When young children understand more words, they understand more concepts. When they have the opportunity to travel, attend enriching activities, and visit museums, the interaction builds more awareness and knowledge that enhances learning.³

There are rare instances in public policy discussions when so many agree on so much. Investing in early-childhood education is one of them. Connecticut teachers join with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, superintendents, child advocates, neighborhood groups, religious leaders of all denominations, and the many others urging lawmakers to enhance early-childhood education.

Investing in a statewide early-childhood education initiative will bring future economic, social, and fiscal returns that outweigh the costs. And it will do more than anything else to close the achievement gap in Connecticut.

Universal Preschool

When so many children start school without the early-childhood opportunities experienced by others, an achievement gap is born. Connecticut elementary schools—and the teachers and staff inside them—inheritor this gap and work every day to narrow it. It's a noble goal but one that can only truly be reached when Connecticut joins the eight states that have committed to providing universal preschool.⁴

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Ensure universal access to high-quality, preschool experiences.

Universal All-Day Kindergarten

Lawmakers should also ensure that children in one town have the same access to universal all-day kindergarten that often is provided to children in a neighboring town. They must recognize the important and potentially constitutional responsibility to equalize access to all-day kindergarten.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Provide incentives for full-day kindergarten to extend the reach of early learning.

Quality Early-Childhood Educators

At a time when we are improving teaching standards for certification for K-12 educators, we must extend high-quality standards for early educators as well. With increasing demand for early education, Connecticut faces the opportunity for job growth in this sector. But tolerance for low standards has been driven by persistently low wages in a vicious cycle that has led to high turnover and insufficient quality. It is time to break this cycle, raise our expectations, and increase early-childhood teaching standards.



CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Upgrade certification requirements for preschool educators to enable them to deliver developmentally appropriate, knowledge-rich programs.

Early Reading and Literacy

One of the strongest factors in a child's likelihood to continue in school, and to do well, is literacy. When young children begin school without the basic building blocks to literacy, many never catch up. The result can be disengagement, school dropout, and lifelong limitations on opportunities. Connecticut recognized the importance of literacy when it established the Early Reading Success program almost 15 years ago. However, the challenges have expanded beyond its limited reach. To be successful in the 21st century, children must first be proficient in reading and writing. They also must develop the more complete listening, observation, and speaking skills that compose literacy. Connecticut needs to do more to ensure literacy by the end of third grade.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Develop and implement tutoring opportunities and extend student and teacher days, weeks, or year to ensure reading proficiency by the end of third grade.

EARLY-
CHILDHOOD
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A photograph of a classroom scene. A female teacher with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a white blazer, is leaning over a desk. She is holding a yellow pencil and pointing at a notebook held by a female student with curly red hair. The student is smiling and looking down at the notebook. In the background, other students are visible, including a male student with brown hair and a female student with long brown hair, all appearing to be engaged in their work. The setting is a classroom with a whiteboard in the background.

A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

**Reforming teacher
accountability
through development
and evaluation**



Reforming Teacher Accountability through Development and Evaluation

Connecticut's future competitiveness relies on the goal of maximizing economic opportunities for all children. Connecticut citizens expect our schools to go beyond promoting academic excellence to achieve this goal. They expect schools to prepare students to become active participants in a democracy, to practice tolerance, and to learn how to lead healthy, productive lives. Connecticut schools seek to inspire creativity in students, an asset that has been recognized as one of America's strongest economic competitive advantages.⁵

Successful schools start with great teachers and effective leaders. They inspire professionalism, which not only helps to retain teachers but makes them more effective. That is why the centerpiece of the Connecticut Education Association's *A View from the Classroom: Proven Ideas for Student Achievement* is strengthening the shared responsibility for accountability while reforming how we recruit, prepare, evaluate, inspire, retain, and develop great teachers.

Teacher Evaluation

Everyone remembers favorite teachers. We remember what those teachers did to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others. But lawmakers have to ask, "Can we measure that?" The answer is that teaching makes a difference in many ways that are complex and difficult to quantify.

How, then, can a valid and reliable teacher evaluation system be designed?⁶ How can an evaluation system identify effective teaching and be used for multiple purposes, such as guiding professional growth, promoting teacher leadership, and/or making employment decisions? After all, these are the primary goals a quality evaluation system should accomplish.

Proponents of high-stakes testing advocate using test scores as the primary measure of school and teacher performance. They are wrong. Learning is more than a score. We cannot fall into the trap of oversimplifying the complexities of teaching and learning. It would be a grave disservice to our students if Connecticut lawmakers imposed an impersonal, singularly focused, test-driven regime on our schools.

To make local evaluation systems more effective, Connecticut must ensure that it supports the numerous goals that lawmakers, parents, and the public expect teachers to accomplish in the classroom. In 2010, the legislature established the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC) to develop guidelines for educator evaluation plans.⁷ As of December 2011, PEAC has completed much of its work but has yet to finalize its proposed guidelines. The state legislature should step in to establish these guidelines statutorily to ensure all local districts implement them.

Of course, an evaluation system is effective only if evaluations are conducted as designed and result in appropriate professional development. It may be surprising to learn that at a time when teacher evaluations are considered more important than ever, there is currently no mechanism to ensure that evaluations are done effectively and consistently. We must reform Connecticut's teacher and administrator evaluation system to be administered more consistently and by evaluators trained to conduct effective evaluations.

For an evaluation plan to be effective, it must be developed by professionals in the field and trusted by those who will use it. To accomplish this, all educators—teachers, administrators, and the superintendent—must be involved in a local plan's development, with unresolved issues being determined by a neutral arbitrator. This strategy works in many other states, including Massachusetts and Illinois. It was the strategy successfully used in New Haven to develop a local evaluation plan that has been held up as an example of collaboration and innovation.

In short, Connecticut lawmakers must establish a framework for local teacher evaluation plans that is comprehensive, effective, consistent, and inclusive.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Require that plans use multiple indicators of student academic growth and development that truly measure the most important aspects of teaching and learning that go beyond achievement as measured by state test scores.⁸

**GREATER
OPPORTUNITY
IS ABOUT MORE
THAN A SCORE.**

- ➔ Require plans to identify instructional areas in need of improvement and lead to related professional learning opportunities. For educators who require more focused or intensive support, evaluation plans must require detailed remediation plans that include appropriate training and support strategies for improving instruction within a limited period of time, with a notification that failure to successfully complete the plan could result in dismissal.
- ➔ Ensure evaluations are conducted consistently, frequently, and by appropriately trained evaluators.
- ➔ Include educators in the development and implementation of local evaluation plans with a system of alternate dispute resolution to decide unresolved issues, resulting in the highest professional standards.

Selecting the Best and Most Appropriate Candidates for the Teaching Profession

As the U.S. economy becomes more diversified, public schools will become increasingly challenged to attract the most highly qualified candidates for teaching. Additionally, public schools will be increasingly challenged to provide staffing that is representative of the communities they serve.⁹ Connecticut has experienced teacher shortages in the past that will only worsen unless there is a better way of connecting strong teacher candidates to the teaching disciplines most in need.¹⁰

Connecticut lawmakers must ensure that public schools will be able to recruit the most high-achieving candidates who exhibit a broad cultural awareness that can improve student learning. They must promote policies that will attract future teachers who will represent the diversity of the U.S., help underserved communities, and fill subject matter areas that exhibit shortages.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Select the best teacher candidates by establishing a system for teachers, school counselors, and administrators to identify, encourage, and recruit high-achieving students

representing America's diversity to pursue careers in teaching, teach in underserved communities, and fill hard-to-staff curricular areas.

Teacher Preparation, Standards, Retention, and Development

Every child deserves teachers who can make a difference. Making a difference in the lives of children is what motivates teachers and is the primary reason most enter the profession.

A recent report by the McGraw-Hill Foundation compared educational practices in countries with the highest scores on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).¹¹ In an alarming finding the report noted that the “teaching profession in the U.S. does not have the same high status as it once did, nor does it compare with the status teachers enjoy in the world’s best-performing economies.”¹² The report showed that in the highest-performing countries (e.g., Finland, Singapore, Japan) there is a higher value placed on educational credentials.

The report also noted that countries that succeeded in raising the status of teaching did so by “offering real career prospects, and giving teachers responsibility as professionals and leaders of reform.”¹³ This was put into practice in Ontario, Canada, where the government agreed with teacher union leaders to provide an unprecedented level of support and professional development with the goal of increasing student performance. As a result, Ontario catapulted its PISA performance from near the bottom to the top tier. And with added professional development and recognition, the status of teachers was elevated.¹⁴

In the U.S., lawmakers should be also concerned about teacher turnover and the negative impact the resulting lack of continuity has on learning.¹⁵ The rate of teacher turnover is troubling. Teacher attrition has grown by 50 percent over the past fifteen years.¹⁶ In the areas where continuity is needed the most, our urban schools, attrition is over 20 percent.¹⁷ Nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching, citing poor professional working conditions among the chief reasons.¹⁸



If Connecticut is to continue to compete in the world economy, it must provide educational policies worthy of its competition. Connecticut must rethink all aspects of teacher professional status by retooling and better connecting teacher preparation training to the real-time needs of today's classrooms, particularly those where the achievement gap is most persistent. Connecticut lawmakers must consider policies that continually improve teacher induction and professional development to keep quality early-career teachers in our schools. And lawmakers must trust that educators, like other professionals, want to elevate their status by setting heightened standards for their profession.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Conduct a review of teacher preparation programs in Connecticut assessing the current cost-model and how best to align teacher education to the real-time staffing and instructional needs of public schools.
- ➔ Require school districts to submit a simple report outlining their local professional development program and to annually submit a report showing their professional development objectives for the year and what progress they've made toward meeting those objectives. This oversight will ensure that suitable plans are in place and help identify best practices.
- ➔ Establish a Professional Standards Board for Educators to set and maintain high, appropriate standards within the profession in ways similar to doctors, lawyers, dentists, and others in careers that require advanced training and education. One hallmark of any profession is for that profession to regulate itself.¹⁹ Professional standards boards exist for many Connecticut professions and successfully accomplish this goal. Educator standards boards exist in 17 states²⁰ and operate either independently or semi-autonomously from their respective state departments of education.²¹ Instituting an educator standards board in Connecticut would result in greater educator effectiveness because educators know what good practice is, will set high, appropriate standards for their roles, and could more effectively align teacher preparation programs with those standards.
- ➔ Foster professional learning environments for educators. Research confirms the impact of professional working conditions on teacher retention, and ultimately on student achievement.²² North Carolina implemented an annual statewide teacher survey to specifically improve the professional school climate. Through this effort, many North Carolina school districts have fostered a culture of mutual trust and respect ultimately leading to an improved learning environment that has helped to

increase stability in the workforce.²³ They offer ideas that Connecticut lawmakers should consider.

- ➔ Require the Department of Education, in partnership with superintendents, teachers, and administrators, to design and disseminate a model school climate survey available for districts to use and to provide analysis to those implementing a survey.
- ➔ Require schools with low performance to include school climate surveys in their school climate assessments, which are already required under law.
- ➔ Require the Department of Education to identify and disseminate strategies found to improve school climates, and ultimately the environment for learning.

Teacher Accountability and Dismissal

With better evaluation systems and more comprehensive professional development plans in place, the vast majority of teachers can become even more effective. Connecticut lawmakers must resist misguided proposals that would permit arbitrary terminations of teachers who have not been adequately evaluated. It is important that lawmakers do not put the cart before the horse. In the unfortunate event that an evaluation system identifies a teacher to be ineffective, the dismissal process should be swift, but fair. Connecticut needs to reform its statutory dismissal process, recognizing that the teacher tenure system, complete with the mistaken notion that tenure means a "job for life," is as misunderstood as it is outdated. It is time to end teacher tenure as we know it, while ensuring jobs are not threatened for petty personal or political reasons that have nothing to do with classroom effectiveness. It is time for Connecticut to reform the dismissal process so that it is speedy, more cost-effective, and fair.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Shorten, by a third, the time it takes to carry out the dismissal process by reducing the statutory timeline from 120 days to 85 days and make other changes that could reduce the timeline even further.
- ➔ Reduce the hearing cost by requiring one arbitrator versus the current system that allows up to three arbitrators, each billing for multiple daily charges.
- ➔ Protect against unfair firings by providing a speedy hearing in front of a single neutral third party.



A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Creating a
positive learning
environment



Creating a Positive Learning Environment

Many factors contribute to improving student achievement. One important factor is the learning environment, or as it is sometimes called, the school climate. A school's climate reflects the shared ideas—assumptions, values, beliefs—and practices that define its culture and standards for expected behavior.²⁴

There is mounting evidence that a positive school climate increases student achievement.²⁵ A school climate that contributes to learning focuses on essential components, including safety and strong relationships between teaching and learning.²⁶

A positive school climate means that students, staff, and visitors all feel safe. Threats to their physical and emotional safety (e.g., bullying) can take a great toll on students, leading some to be fearful of attending school²⁷ and ultimately impacting student learning.²⁸ Bullying does not only impact the children in schools. Growing evidence indicates that a significant number of teachers are treated disrespectfully, threatened, and even physically assaulted by students every year, further deteriorating the school climate.²⁹

A school climate that builds a culture of mutual trust and respect, engages participants, and supports a relationship between teaching and learning can improve childhood health and academic performance.³⁰ Ensuring that a school's learning environment is sensitive to its culturally and linguistically diverse student body results in stronger connections between each student and teacher.

The nation became focused on school safety in the wake of extreme acts of random and well-publicized school violence that cannot and should not be forgotten. Such extreme acts attract the most attention; however, the more frequent and pervasive issues involve physical and emotional acts toward students and, increasingly, acts of disrespect and violence toward teachers. The keys to reversing this troubling trend are prevention and early intervention. Disrespectful actions lead to violence. Lawmakers must ensure that any violent behavior, whether against a student, a teacher, or anyone else in the school, is swiftly addressed and does not get swept under the rug. Ignoring such behavior sends the wrong signal to students and staff that violence is tolerated, which in turn undermines the overall learning environment in a school. Research shows that improving the school climate leads to better

academic performance.³¹ Lawmakers must promote safer school climate policies and with them better learning conditions.

Enhance Anti-Bullying Tools

There is no question that bullying is a challenge facing all schools. Research indicates that anywhere from 30 percent³² to over 60 percent³³ of school-aged children report being subjected to some form of bullying or harassment at school. Moreover, by the time they graduate from high school, nearly all students will have been exposed at some point to bullying at school,³⁴ especially in middle schools and urban areas.³⁵

The evidence is clear—bullying negatively affects learning and undermines the ability of students to reach their full potential.³⁶ Victims of bullying are at greater risk of skipping school or spending the school day in fear,³⁷ ultimately impacting their ability to learn.³⁸ As the legislature recognized last year, efforts to address low achievement in school must include anti-bullying policies.

In a national survey, teachers and school staff recognize the increased incidence of bullying at school, and over 50 percent report that it is a serious problem.³⁹ They should know since an increasing number of students seek guidance about bullying from their teachers.⁴⁰ Yet, many staff members feel disengaged and ill-equipped to help due to inadequate training. Nationally, only about half of teachers and educational support personnel have received training in bullying prevention and intervention.⁴¹ In particular, teachers cite cyberbullying, sexting, and harassment based on sexual orientation as those areas in which they need specialized training.⁴²

The legislature recognized this when it passed comprehensive bullying and cyberbullying legislation in 2011. The 2011 legislation also required school districts to implement school climate plans. Both are commendable building blocks toward a more comprehensive school-wide anti-bullying effort that can promote better learning environments.⁴³ Still, there is more that can be done. Lawmakers should work to improve the way laws are implemented to prevent and address bullying.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Conduct school climate surveys. Recently, North Carolina implemented a statewide teacher survey to identify schools where disrespect, aggression, and intimidation negatively impact the learning environment. This survey strategy helps to identify poor learning environments, particularly

those with a diminished culture of respect and trust that can, and often have, led to bullying and violence. Lawmakers should build upon the school climate legislation enacted in 2011 (as recommended in the previous section) to provide a tool to school leaders to effectively prevent aggressive or violent school climates.

- ➔ Monitor implementation of bullying laws. The 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 Violence against Teachers

National statistics show that a troubling rise in the incidence of violence against teachers has reached unprecedented levels.⁴⁴ During the 2007-08 school year, seven percent of teachers indicated that they had been threatened with injury or physically attacked by a student from their school.⁴⁵ Other reports have found the percentage to be even higher.⁴⁶ In Connecticut, violence against school staff is occurring with even greater frequency. In 2009-10, there were 836 reported incidents of physical altercations, fighting, or battery directed against certified school staff. In 2010-11, the number grew to 1,021.⁴⁷ In addition, there were 507 reports of physical aggression against other, non-certified staff, including substitute teachers during that same school year.⁴⁸ It is important to note that these data reflect only reported incidents of violence against teachers. Unfortunately, many educators do not report a physical assault against them for fear of retribution. As a result, schools and police are left with unreliable data, and thus are unable to assess and address the true scope of the problem in their community.

Although Connecticut law requires principals to file a copy of a teacher's assault report with the local police,⁴⁹ it is common for that report not to be forwarded to the local police authority, in direct violation of state law. That statute does not have any enforcement mechanism, and thus it is often ignored by administrators, leaving teachers without any real recourse. Moreover, state law specifically prohibits school administrators from interfering with the right of a teacher or any school employee to file a complaint with the police in cases of threats of physical violence and in cases of physical assaults by a student against such teacher or employee.⁵⁰ Yet, despite this protection, many teachers remain afraid to file a report with their principal, let alone directly with the local police. As a result, state laws should

be strengthened to provide a remedy in cases where a principal defies his or her statutory assault-reporting responsibility. This will lead to accrual of more accurate data and the prevention of future assaults since immediate intervention following an assault can reduce the likelihood of further violent incidents.⁵¹

Finally, there are long-term consequences of this violence against school staff for students who are ultimately affected by a hostile learning environment. Teachers who feel unsafe in their schools often decide to leave the profession, and studies show that teacher attrition has a negative effect on students' engagement and achievement.⁵² An assault against a teacher can result in lost wages for the victim, workers' compensation claims, litigation costs, and lost instructional time.⁵³ Lawmakers must act to address the growing trend of violence against teachers.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Strengthen penalties for principals who—although required by law to report assaults on teachers to the police—fail to do so.
- ➔ Provide teachers with the same legal protections given to nurses, social workers, and bus drivers who are assaulted in the line of duty.



Build Stronger Relationships between Teaching and Learning

In a time of fiscal constraint, it is imperative that Connecticut invest in educational improvement strategies with a proven record of success. Those that have proven most successful have one common theme: They involve teachers and other school personnel in the most critical decisions affecting student learning.

For decades, external reform groups and self-interested for-profit companies and individuals have tried to impose change from outside. The result is all too predictable—faddish, out-of-touch reforms fail to make a real or lasting difference. As research has shown, effective continual school improvement is about involving those who are asked to implement the change—teachers, administrators, parents, and community members who support public schools.⁵⁴ In short, the hallmark of any successful reform strategy is that it is done *with* teachers and administrators, not *to* them.⁵⁵ After all, they are the experts in teaching and learning. Fortunately, Connecticut has already begun implementing successful reform strategies that do just this.

CALI

In 2007, the General Assembly established the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI) to address the achievement gap. CALI is active in 18 urban and urban-ring school districts, representing nearly a third of all Connecticut students.⁵⁶ CALI is a data-driven model of continuous improvement that independent auditors have determined to be highly effective.⁵⁷

Key components of the mission and vision of CALI include strong leadership at all levels, with a sense of urgency for change; targeting of human and fiscal resources, in the form of grant funding, consultative support, and training opportunities; professional learning and development opportunities integrated into the classroom; student-centered improvement plans based on external, district-wide, and school-level assessments; and integration of data teams to better target curriculum and high-quality instruction at the district, school, and instructional team levels.

The results of CALI are clear. A statewide system of support has developed, capable of efficiently targeting resources and timely support where they are needed most. At the same time, the model has enabled school reform and improvement to be generated from the ground up, a process much more sustainable and replicable than failed top-down reforms. Most importantly, mounting evidence shows that CALI has increased student engagement, improved achievement, and enhanced learning.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Expand the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI) which has successfully boosted student achievement by strengthening teachers' skills in world-class, research-based, data-driven instruction and quality interventions.
- ➔ Increase research into culturally and linguistically diverse student populations and embed the best practices in programs such as CALI.

CommPACT Schools

The CommPACT Schools model was established legislatively in 2007. It is a first-of-its-kind whole-school reform program that is making a difference in many urban schools in Connecticut. The CommPACT Schools model—which embodies a shared commitment by key school partners, including community members, parents, administrators, children, and teachers—partners with the UConn Neag School of Education to link research-based solutions directly to schools and classrooms. When these partners are engaged in the teaching and learning process, the resulting shared purpose has been shown to improve student learning.⁵⁸ All CommPACT Schools have demonstrated gains in student achievement in at least one area since beginning their engagement in the CommPACT process.⁵⁹ It also is important to note the accomplishments below.

- An upward trend in standardized test scores is identified with dramatic growth in several schools, particularly Barnum School in Bridgeport and Westside Middle School in Waterbury, both of which outscore other schools in their districts.
- Impressive improvement at Westside Middle School in Waterbury and Bassick High School in Bridgeport has elevated them to “Safe-Harbor” status.
- Notable increases in parental and community involvement include higher attendance at school meetings and events, improved rates of volunteering, more engagement in school activities, and greater participation on steering committees.
- Improved school learning climates due to implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) have resulted in reduced suspensions and improved student learning.

THE HALLMARK
OF ANY
SUCCESSFUL
SCHOOL
REFORM IS
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WITH EDUCATORS,
NOT TO THEM.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Invest in “innovation school” transformation models, such as the CommPACT school model, that are implemented within the public school system and are scalable in other neighborhood schools, particularly those identified as in need of improvement.

Collaboration

Our schools must continually improve to adapt to the ever-changing needs of today’s complex economy and world. The stakes have never been higher. That is why when the educators at one school find a formula for success, it should be shared with educators in other schools across the state. In fact, Connecticut magnet and charter schools were initially envisioned to foster and share best practices to promote innovation in school reform. Unfortunately, this collaboration of ideas has yet to achieve its true potential. Connecticut should look to its own collaborative model implemented by the State Education Resource Center as a blueprint for developing a clearinghouse of best practices to promote school reform and student growth and development.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Establish strategies, a clearinghouse, or a resource center to showcase and disseminate best practices developed by any of Connecticut’s public schools, whether they are charter, CommPACT, vocational-agriculture, vocational-technical, or magnet schools.

A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Encouraging parental and community participation



Encouraging Parental and Community Participation

Connecticut will never be able to close the achievement gap if policymakers focus solely on what happens behind classroom doors. After all, children are in the care of a school for fewer than 25 percent of their waking hours. Parents, families, and communities matter.

Children who thrive in school are nourished and healthy and have opportunities to learn from the moment the schoolhouse door closes to the moment it opens the next day. They have received “wraparound” services as a part of life. They experience teaching almost every hour of their waking day, even before meeting their first schoolteacher. But many children who arrive at school do not share in these benefits.

Everyone agrees that for Connecticut to make real progress toward closing the achievement gap, all hands must be on deck. Children facing the greatest challenges in the classroom quite often face poverty, poor access to nutrition and health care, and parents who have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Consequently, 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 services, support, and resources that are enriching to the mind, body, and readiness for learning. Various cities across the country—such as Newark, New Jersey—are building community partnerships around the commonsense notion that by combining school-based social services, after-school programs, and interventions that specifically address local challenges (e.g., health, nutrition, jobs, and safety), schools can better meet the needs of all students.⁶⁰ The Say Yes to Education program in Syracuse, New York, integrates after-school programs with school-based health centers and other identified needs.⁶¹ Expanding such ingenuity to Connecticut’s neediest communities is an attainable goal offering tremendous benefits, including greater student achievement⁶² and improved graduation rates.⁶³

Health and Wellness

Policymakers must address imbalances in “wraparound” services and consider policies that promote a culture of learning in and out of school for more children.

Connecticut broke ground when it passed a landmark school nutrition bill that kicked sugary drinks out of schools, but its reach stopped at the federal school lunch line. School lunches remain as unhealthy and unsavory as ever, sacrificing energy kids need to grow and learn.

Just as the connection between nutrition and learning is strong,⁶⁴ learning is also connected to the general health and wellness of children.⁶⁵ Many childhood illnesses are preventable if access to health services is available. In other cases, environmental conditions disproportionately promote illness.

**LEARNING IS ABOUT
MORE THAN WHAT
HAPPENS IN
THE CLASSROOM.**

Lawmakers must recognize and address the vast differences in community environments that affect the health and well-being of Connecticut children.

Lower-income communities experience disproportionately high rates of lead exposure, which in Connecticut has resulted in “lower

achievement test scores even when exposure was at levels below a minimum federal standard used for defining lead poisoning.”⁶⁶ These communities also have higher rates of asthma, a condition that is responsible for children missing 10 million school days each year across the country.⁶⁷ And, there is growing recognition that children, particularly children of color living amidst urban violence experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁶⁸ Violence-related PTSD is linked to lower achievement among urban youth.⁶⁹ The cumulative effects are clear. Children who experience persistent illness are less prepared to learn. Bringing wellness and healthcare services into schools has proven effective at combating illness and helping children focus more on learning.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Provide the services and social/health supports that children and families need under the school roof, including more registered nurses on hand to assist students and ensure that all students enter schools appropriately immunized.
- ➔ Provide a challenge grant to promote innovative, cost-efficient partnerships between school lunch programs and healthier, locally produced foods for use in the federal school lunch program.

Community and Parental Involvement

It's clear from research that "when schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more."⁷⁰ The more parents are involved in their child's education, the higher the child's academic achievement.⁷¹ In fact, the conclusions from more than 50 studies⁷² show that students whose parents are involved in their education, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programs; be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits; attend school regularly; have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

But parents are working longer hours today than decades ago. The typical American middle-income family put in an average of 11 more hours a week in 2006 than it did in 1979.⁷³ Today, 70 percent of schoolchildren are in families with either a working single parent or a household where both parents work.⁷⁴

Lawmakers should consider innovative ways to reconnect parents to the work being asked of their children in their classrooms. Some states have begun to do this. Twelve states, including nearby Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont, provide parental leave for school-related activities. Such policies address the struggle for time that most parents face when work obligations conflict with the educational needs of their children.

There have also been other innovative approaches to increase parental engagement. In many communities, teachers are working with administration to try innovative ways to increase parental participation. In one approach to increasing parental engagement, in Stratford, Connecticut, the local union implemented an "Excellence for All" program. Through one-time private grant funding, the program offered special workshops to 100 parents, providing them with easy-to-use techniques for structuring time for student improvement and improving collaboration with teachers.

Excellence for All included Real Dads Forever sessions, which broke down barriers that stood in the way of fathers' involvement in the day-to-day school life of their children. Teachers were trained in making their instruction and interaction more culturally competent to diverse students and families. Among third-graders whose parents participated in Excellence for All, a narrower achievement gap has already been documented.



In Bridgeport, Connecticut, local educators addressed poor parental attendance at school meetings by paying for cabs. This simple idea not only worked but also helped to create a culture of involvement. As a result, parents eventually began carpooling and organizing to attend meetings.

These successes did not require much more than some innovation and a small financial commitment. With innovation, a little money can go a long way. Lawmakers should consider strategies for tapping into inexpensive innovation that helps better engage parents in the day-to-day schooling of their children.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Promote incentives for employers to provide time for parents to participate in school-day activities.
- ➔ Develop a challenge grant that would promote even greater collaboration between parents and teachers.
- ➔ Provide training for School Governance Councils to promote cultural awareness and respect, and expand the training to all stakeholders.



A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Ensuring the fair distribution of resources



Ensuring the Fair Distribution of Resources

When so many children start school without the early-childhood opportunities experienced by others, an achievement gap is born. Connecticut schools inherit this gap and strive to close it. But Connecticut teachers, who are asked to compensate for these differences, must do so even when resources are dwindling. Surveys of Connecticut teachers indicate that each year many spend hundreds of dollars (some in excess of \$1,000) out of pocket to provide basic provisions in their schools: paper, pencils, lab materials, books, color copies, notebooks, maps, computer drives, and even lunches for students.

When the number of children in a class exceeds manageable numbers, each child receives less individualized attention. Effective teachers have class sizes that enable them to address each child's unique needs and intuitive questions. Dwindling resources and staff reductions erect barriers to learning, especially in districts facing the greatest financial and socioeconomic challenges.

Equalizing educational opportunity was precisely the goal behind the state's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant program. Unfortunately, the program remains significantly underfunded, shifting the costs to local property taxpayers. If we are to meet the constitutional goal of ensuring substantially equal educational opportunity, we must correct the ECS grant formula by restoring key factors envisioned in its original design.

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 and equitably fund its schools. In short, education must become a more significant state priority if we are ever to grow jobs.

Resources for Small Class Size

The research is in, and state policies to reduce class size would improve educational opportunities significantly while providing a substantial return on the state's investment.⁷⁵ Reducing class size will go a long way toward reducing the achievement gap in the critical early grades.⁷⁶ The benefits of reducing class size are even stronger for children of color, resulting in greater opportunities for college.⁷⁷ The positive effects are not just in the early grades. A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that student achievement was more strongly linked to smaller classes in the upper grades than in lower grades.⁷⁸

Reducing class size does more than just boost student achievement. Researchers say that a policy of reducing class size “appears to be more cost-effective than most medical and public health interventions ...[and]... may exert a greater positive impact on public health outcomes than comparable investments in medical care.”⁷⁹ Reducing class size also improves high school graduation rates,⁸⁰ which brings additional benefits, such as fewer incarcerations and higher future earnings. Considering that it costs more to send a student to prison⁸¹ than it does to Princeton,⁸² investing in class size reduction has a clear payoff.

During this time of fiscal uncertainty, class sizes have increased in many districts, particularly those serving lower-income students and children of color. This trend must stop. Large class sizes expand the achievement gap and violate the state's constitutional obligation to equalize and maximize educational opportunity for all.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Increase state funding of local education expenses equitably and target a portion of additional resources toward meeting and sustaining smaller class size goals.

State Funding Equity

Any increases in state aid should be targeted equitably. CEA urges lawmakers to steer the ECS formula back toward its intended result, driven by Horton vs. Meskill, to equalize funding based on districts' ability to pay.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Increase the per-pupil grant (also known as the “foundation”) level to reflect the real cost of adequately educating students and index the amount to adjust for changing costs over time.
- ➔ Use more current and accurate data to determine town wealth and measures of personal and/or household income.
- ➔ Use free and reduced-price lunch/breakfast eligibility as a more accurate measure of poverty in schools.

**CLOSING THE
ACHIEVEMENT
GAP REQUIRES
FIXING THE
RESOURCE GAP.**

- ➔ Use a scheduled phase-in approach (in the absence of full funding) to increase funding over time rather than impose freezes or other arbitrary and politically driven limits on funding changes.

One major cost of schooling is the unfunded federal special education mandate. 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. The unpredictable nature of excess special education costs places an unfair burden on local budgets and, in an environment of fiscal austerity, squeezes out funds for regular programs.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Set a goal of reimbursing districts for the excess cost of providing a student with special education when such costs exceed local per-pupil expenditures. The current threshold of 4.5 times local per-pupil expenditures is unfair and unsustainable for local districts.
- ➔ Reject proposals to fold special education into ECS, as was done nearly 20 years ago, thereby diluting its impact.



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Advocating for teachers
and public education

Connecticut Education Association

Capitol Place, Suite 500

21 Oak Street

Hartford, Connecticut 06106

cea.org