



# **CAPSS Update: A Blueprint to Transform Connecticut's Public Schools**



Dear Education Policy Makers and Practitioners,

In January 2021 the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS) put forth a *Blueprint to Transform Connecticut's Public Schools*. It is a comprehensive and long-term vision for continuous improvement. In this update we share again the 30 recommendations (on pages 7 - 10) of the *Blueprint* as well as a commentary on what has changed in the last year and what should be Connecticut's priorities for the next few years.

# 2021 PROGRESS

**CAPSS wishes to thank all those who have taken up the fight against Covid-19 recognizing its impact on schools, students, staff, and families. We are also grateful that:**

**A. The Connecticut General Assembly and Governor took several steps in the right direction by:**

1. Adding more funds to ECS than planned, refocusing on the additional costs of English Language Learners and the concentration of poverty, adding a hold harmless to the grants for two years, and prohibiting mid-year rescissions of ECS grants; (See Recs. 1, 2 & 3)
2. Establishing a new Center for Literacy Research within the CSDE, and improving reading instruction using dedicated federal funds; (See Recs. 12 & 13)
3. Requiring a major study of Special Education; (See Rec. 30)
4. Requiring a statewide improvement to virtual learning with analysis and recommendations to address all aspects of remote learning; (See Rec. 11)
5. Increasing State funding to towns for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (Pilot) program and incorporating education grant formula components in the distribution; (See Rec. 18)
6. Embracing minority teacher preparation programs in Alliance districts and requiring further study of preservice assessments; (See Rec. 10)
7. Supporting the Connecticut State Department of Education's new K-12 curriculum guides in all subject areas, which will significantly improve the quality of teaching and learning in every school district; (See Rec. 13)
8. Authorizing \$1 Billion in the biennium for the state share of school construction; (See Rec. 5)
9. Improving the long-term financial viability of the Teachers Retirement System including the contribution of excess state surplus funds; (See Rec. 20)
10. Creating State and regional support and assistance strategies for social emotional learning and school climate, and encouraging private philanthropy to assist — particularly with disengaged youth and wrap-around social services. (See Recs. 14 & 15)



**B. Local districts, as a result of the pandemic, have undertaken several shifts from traditional schooling to new ways of operating including:**

1. Developing new and creative ways to communicate and partner with families and students;
2. Accelerating learning for all students and particularly for those with the greatest needs;
3. Significantly improving virtual learning;
4. Deeply focusing on social/emotional health and growth of students and staff;
5. Increasing collaboration among districts to solve problems and improve protocols and procedures;
6. Ensuring that the voices of school district leaders are heard in state and federal decision- making.

**C. The Federal Government, thankfully, has allocated significant (\$1B) (one-time) funds in three installments to be spent by school districts through 2024 with the intent to supplement local and state funds and address the learning losses of 2020. In addition, federal funds for early childhood and local governments (nearly \$2B) have been provided.**

**Steps must be taken to alleviate the loss of federal dollars at the end of 2024. To sustain recent successful initiatives this “cliff” can be minimized by adding smaller amounts of State and local funds in each of the next three years.**

**Throughout the last two years, public officials, education leaders, and especially teachers have demonstrated a caring, thoughtful and successful response to the pandemic. Looking forward, all of us must commit to making equity and student success our priorities. The future of our communities, State and country are at stake and dependent upon how well we invest in our public schools.**

# 2022 THROUGH 2024 NEXT STEPS/PRIORITIES

**A. Education policy makers, at both the State and local level should focus primarily on allocating greater and more equitable resources for public schools while expecting stronger student success.**

1. The General Assembly and Governor should continue to refine the ECS formula to focus funds on the neediest districts, recognizing their education challenges and the local capacity to pay. The size of the pie and the State's share must grow every year with a stronger long-term commitment. No town should lose funds from the 2020-21 base year; and there should never be mid-year rescissions.
2. The State must also address the growing need to fund the recommended categorical grant programs and amend legislation as follows:
  - i. 2022
    - a. Fully fund the Special Education excess cost grant; (See Rec. 4)
    - b. Provide more resources to support English Language Learner (ELL) programs; (See Rec. 7)
    - c. Begin implementation of universal Pre-K in districts with the greatest need; (See Rec. 8)
    - d. Expand and improve regional services being provided by the six RESCs; (See Rec. 23)
  - ii. 2023
    - a. Merge and streamline all State grants for School improvement in Alliance Districts; (See Rec. 25)
    - b. Increase financial support to state and community agencies enabling them to support students' social/emotional growth and health; (See Rec. 14)
    - c. Make infrastructure/air quality operating and capital funds available to school districts to ensure that all school buildings are safe; (See Rec. 29)
  - iii. 2024
    - a. Develop and execute a plan to ensure every family/community has access to the internet; (See Rec. 11)
    - b. Improve adult education access and programs; (See Rec. 6)
    - c. Reinstate State funds for transportation overburden; (See Rec. 9)

In consultation with others, CAPSS will begin to draft legislative proposals designed to implement each recommendation of the CAPSS *Blueprint*. These will include grant specifications and simulations, requirements for further research and reporting by the CSDE, improving student assessments, school and municipal cooperation, methods of measuring success, and issues of Governance including role clarification and necessary training for Board members and administrators.

Concurrently, CAPSS Public Policy Agenda 2022 also includes a call for more widespread access to high-quality remote and virtual learning, for all students, year round and from now on; and a critical review of the State's teacher evaluation mandate that must result in greater local choice.



**B. Education leaders at the local and State level need to act now rather than wait for others to act in setting clear priorities for improving education for every child. Priorities should include:**

1. Attacking inequity/unfairness in policies, regulations, practices that result in the discrimination of students and/or staff;
2. Improving reading instruction in the relentless pursuit of every child becoming a successful reader by grade two and adding more one-on-one instruction with each student to achieve this goal;
3. Creating schools that are safe and ones in which there is a sense of belonging; infusing social and emotional health into the curriculum; increasing mental health literacy of educators and connecting with community agencies for support with serious mental health and trauma issues;
4. Seeking to hire highly qualified staff reflective of the diversity of Connecticut;
5. Studying the identification of Special Education students, as well as growth and performance indicators, costs, and percent exiting the program;
6. Continuing outreach to and building relationships with families in efforts to hear their voices and recognize them as partners in their children's learning;
7. Adding 21st Century Skills – such as collaborating, innovating, communicating, discerning and problem solving – to the K-12 curriculum and experiences while increasing accelerated learning for all;
8. Demonstratively supporting the role of the teacher and the leadership of the principal as necessary to student success.
9. Committing to continuous innovation at all levels of learning;
10. Adopting an improvement plan at the school, district, region and Statewide level.

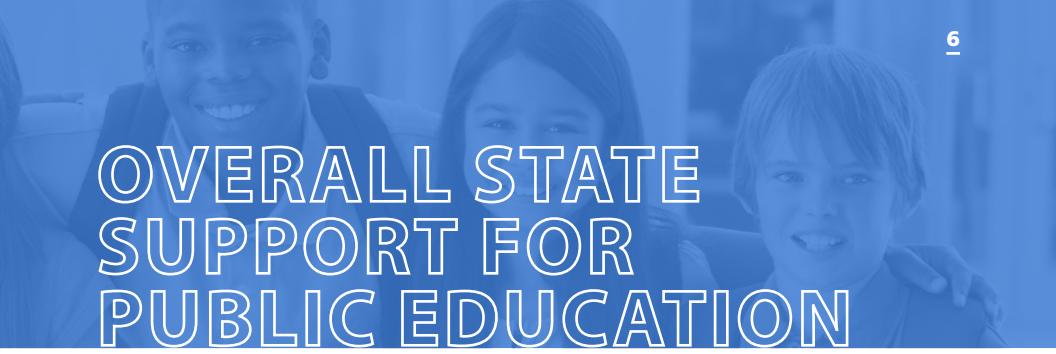
“ *The State must more robustly fund a guaranteed and digestible annual increase in the ECS Grant, the Special Ed Grant, and several other categorical grants, while also providing legislation that demands change and innovation, attacks discriminatory structures, and eliminates barriers to opportunity.* ”

# WHAT WE KNOW

**Connecticut has made some visible progress in its quest for more equitable school funding and in reducing its achievement gaps. However, no one should claim victory. The glass is at most only one-half filled. Beyond adhering to its legal and legislative obligations, Connecticut must aspire to exceed meeting its moral obligation to fully address the needs of every student.**

- A. The State of Connecticut has a legal obligation to lead, appropriately fund, and support public schools. Only the State can counteract the influence of local wealth on determining educational expenditures and opportunities.
- B. Too many relatively poor towns with high education needs and high local tax rates are at the bottom of per-pupil spending; further, the State's achievement gaps by town, income group, and racial and ethnic group are alarmingly unacceptable.
- C. COVID-19 has exacerbated the learning gaps and the digital divide, thereby putting Connecticut's neediest students in an even more precarious position.
- D. Other states with a statewide improvement plan and significant new funds have recently surpassed Connecticut in the quest for continuous improvement of schools.
- E. The continuing inequities and debate over the funding of magnet schools (and other schools of choice) from multiple sources, and the provision of and responsibility for special education and transportation at these schools have NOT been addressed for the long term.
- F. The most important lessons of the last 50 years of public policy related to equal educational opportunity are:
  - 1. The failure to develop and stay with a multi-year plan, regardless of national and state economic conditions;
  - 2. The failure to take a comprehensive approach, and over-reliance on a single equalization formula;
  - 3. The failure to focus on the size and totality of the State's contribution; and
  - 4. The failure of both the federal and state government to meet their obligation to fund special education to the detriment of both special and regular education programs.

“*The State of Connecticut cannot and will not reduce inequities in its school funding system unless it significantly increases state aid as a percentage of all revenues dedicated to public schools.*”



# OVERALL STATE SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

**Aspiring towards the goal of the state and its municipalities sharing equally in the total cost of public education would be a major step in the right direction.**

The 2019 state share of 41% and local share of 53% of the cost of public education (federal support at 6%) – has been at or near this level for nearly 30 years. This ratio leaves the majority of funds coming from local property taxes resulting in continuing inter-town inequities, inequities that were challenged in *Horton vs. Meskill* nearly 50 years ago.

While state aid, ECS, and other grants have been heavily based on wealth and need since the early 1980s, the aggregate amount of state aid has not been sufficient to help those towns with the greatest educational need and the least capacity to spend more.

Moving toward a state share, not town by town, but in the aggregate of 47% of all costs of public education, with matching local contributions of roughly 47%, is the only fair and equitable solution. This goal should help shape the amount of new funds in ECS and other state grants.

In recent years, the State's considerable extra/make-up funding of the teacher's retirement system, which was both necessary and long overdue, has helped to maintain the State's percent contribution to public education. Unfortunately, those funds do not help equalize and/or support local spending, nor do they directly provide educational opportunities.

“ *The most important step in the continuous improvement of the Connecticut public schools is to increase the State's share of total expenses and to continue to focus on equity and student success.* ”

## SCHOOL FINANCE

### 1 | State Share

The State must spend considerably more to meet a goal that the State and towns will equally share K-12 spending.

### 2 | ECS Predictability

Prohibit the Governor from making mid-year changes to ECS. The General Assembly will have a May 1 deadline for setting ECS final grant awards for the year beginning next July 1st.

### 3 | ECS Improvements

In a fifteen-year plan, ECS will grow by about 2.5% annually. The Foundation will grow each year; annual ECS losses for 95 towns will be eliminated. There will be equity driven phase-in of distributions and hold harmless provisions when appropriate.

### 4 | Special Education

Support a two-year phase-in of Excess Cost grant full funding with State scrutiny of growing identification rates and rising costs. The Grant will be paid on a more timely basis with incentives to keep students in district/state.

### 5 | School Construction

Increase reimbursement (for most) to 10%-80% with stricter State project requirements; and address air conditioning and air quality in every school.

### 6 | Adult Education

Mandated services be transferred to RESCs; enrichment classes remain locally administered.

### 7 | English Language Learners

Require schools to develop plans for ELLs; significant new State funding will be phased in to help pay for programming. Greater use of technology required.

### 8 | Early Childhood

Adopt a goal of universal early childhood access for all underserved 3 and 4-year-olds with a first task of determining total level of need in each town. Strengthen the bonds of these early childhood programs with public kindergarten programs.

### 9 | Transportation

Reinstitute over two years a wealth-based reimbursement grant for towns with the greatest (%) public transportation costs.

## EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, ACHIEVEMENT, AND INNOVATION

### 10 | **Structural Racism**

Directly address structural racism and other forms of discrimination within classrooms, schools and districts and adopt practices that promote diversity. Examine and act upon data on enrollment in higher level courses, Special Education identification rates, discipline patterns, retentions, graduation rates, board and school policies, with the goal of reducing/eliminating discriminatory practices toward students of color. Use new State funds for minority teacher recruitment, teacher training in and access to proven bias-free curriculum and materials.

Importantly, the State and Local governments should convene an advisory committee and agree to a ten-year effort to reduce structural racism.

### 11 | **Virtual Learning**

Rethink virtual learning by radically improving the technology, content, and the use of virtual learning. Assist teachers and families. Expect that some amount of virtual learning will always be needed going forward.

### 12 | **Student Assessment**

Seek federal waivers (if required) to drop the grades 4, 6, and 8 assessments; add State paid PSATs. Make statewide Smarter Balance/PSAT/SAT materials available at school and at home.

### 13 | **SDE Leadership**

State Department of Education must lead in advancing 21st century learning skills (such as collaboration, problem solving, and creativity), portrait of the graduate (with independent learning skills) with suggested, easily available, and aligned curricula and materials.

### 14 | **Student Well Being**

Provide new State aid for student safety, trauma, mental health and wellbeing, and improved networks of providers and services.

### 15 | **Disengaged Youth**

The State must support schools in their outreach to disengaged/disenfranchised youth aimed at high school completion and career pathway programs.

### 16 | **Teacher Certification**

Eliminate barriers to teacher certification (including a review and updating of legal and regulatory requirements), creating new regional preparation programs for teachers and leaders with a renewed focus on quality preservice (student teaching) experiences. Clarify current requirements for evaluation and professional development.



## IMPROVING INTERGOVERNMENTAL MATTERS

### 17 | **Federal Funds**

Coordinate an effort to require the federal Department of Education to meet its fiscal promises, such as financing at least 40% of CT's \$2 billion annual Special Education bill.

### 18 | **Municipal Overburden**

Merge, simplify, and financially hold harmless non-State aid to towns.

### 19 | **State and Local Debt**

Require an annual accounting of all State and Local debt along with plans to pay off these debts (capital, pension, and non-pension retirement benefit obligations).

### 20 | **Teacher Retirement System (TRB)**

Support continued changes that provide financial relief to the TRB, and consider the possibility of options for a choice of retirement plan for new hires.

### 21 | **State Grant Elimination**

Eliminate several small grants and re-purpose the funding to new School Improvement Grant.

### 22 | **MER (MBR)**

Reinstate a minimum expenditure requirement and faithfully execute its implementation.

### 23 | **Regionalism**

Encourage and provide funding to assist the Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) to facilitate the regionalization of services, especially for Students with Disabilities.

### 24 | **Waivers**

Adopt a process for the Department of Education to waive certain non-health/safety mandates for districts demonstrating high growth, high achievement, and gap closing.

## ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

### 25 | **School Improvement Grant**

With the merger of five mostly Priority and Alliance School District grants, (and the repurposing of several smaller grants), these funds will financially hold harmless approximately half of the Alliance Districts that currently benefit from the PSD grants, and expand to all of the Alliance Districts programs to improve student achievement. (Roughly 30 to 40 districts total)

### 26 | **Governance**

Clarify State laws and regulations about the roles/responsibilities of superintendents, and local boards of education, as well as the State Board of Education in the takeover process.

### 27 | **Public School Choice**

Financially maintain high quality schools of choice with possible matching of the ECS Foundation level; acknowledge and address the inequities and long-term funding problems of magnet schools with goal driven solutions.

### 28 | **Measuring Success**

Commit an annual report on progress reducing inequalities and disparities in expenditures, programs, and achievements.

### 29 | **Health and Safety**

Related to COVID-19, but also to potential future pandemics, require districts to conduct health and safety audits based on an SDE template and prepare comprehensive plans that show continuous readiness for future pandemics and other interruptions.

### 30 | **More Research Needed**

The State Department of Education should do extensive research on:

- the disparity in per pupil expenditures,
- the growth in special education, and
- the insufficiency of programs for English Learners.

School districts that are outliers in the statewide database should be asked to explain the conditions that cause them to be so far outside the average district.



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