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# OPINION

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## State's boards of education are fulfilling commitment to public education

By Leonard Lockhart

There are 1,400 members of Connecticut's local and regional public boards of education, making us the largest group of elected officials in the state. We are tasked with delivering on the promise of Connecticut's constitutional mandate to provide a free and appropriate education for all of Connecticut's children, and we fulfill that promise with several partners—including school superintendents, public school faculty, administrators and staff, Gov. Ned Lamont and the members of the Connecticut General Assembly who write the laws and the budgets that help drive and fund public education.

With March designated Board of Education Appreciation Month, there is no better time to shine the light on the important role board members play and the challenges and opportunities that we see for Connecticut public education in 2024.

I serve on the Windsor Board of Education and chair the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education Board of Directors. CABE represents 90 percent of Connecticut's public boards of education and works with school board members to support their work in local districts and we advocate on their behalf at the State Capitol.

This Wednesday is our annual "CABE Day on the Hill," a day when board members from the four corners of the state come to the State Capitol to meet face-to-face with state lawmakers on the important matters facing all of us.

Our top message: Keep your promises. Given the number of new initiatives and reforms put in place by the federal, state and local governments, this is a time where we need to maintain our commitment to our public schools. Lawmakers and Gov. Lamont demonstrated their commitment to funding public education by the accelerated phase-in of the Education Cost Sharing, or ECS, formula, which is the state's primary funding grant for local education. CABE commends them for this—as well as the elements of their two-year budget that created a more uniform and streamlined way to fund schools of choice such as magnet schools, agricultural science and technology centers, Open Choice, and charter schools based on a per-student state subsidy linked to the ECS foundation and student need.

You see, the economic challenges faced at all levels of government are felt most intensely at the local level, where we are in the middle of the budget development and adoption season. Changing plans

mid-stream only makes our challenges more difficult, and we are urging legislators and the governor to stick with their plan.

Board of education members also continue to advocate for full funding for the Special Education Excess Cost Reimbursement Grant, which is currently capped. This cap creates a hardship on local districts, which is why we are urging legislators to remove the cap to restore the safety net available to districts for these extraordinary—and rising—educational costs. Loss of these funds impacts the district's full budget as mandated programs for students with special needs can force a district to remove funding for programs outside of the special education designation.

We are also urging the legislature to:

Help us continue to reengage students with poor attendance through the Learner Engagement in Education Program—as poor attendance in the early grades is linked to a lack of success in reading, a critical skill for learning.

Allow flexibility in the implementation of the reading program mandate to recognize successful programs.

Invest in programs that promote the training, hiring and retention of educators of diverse backgrounds and increase opportunities for districts/RESA "grow

your own" programs.

Commit state funding to enable districts to support the continued need for counselors, mental health staff and other supports as federal COVID relief funds come to an end. My own board in Windsor, for example, is working to keep some of the positions that were funded through federal COVID relief such as social-emotional learning specialists, a social worker and a math interventionist.

Connecticut's school boards have an obligation to all our students, and we count on the governor and General Assembly to keep the promise of education funding. We ask that as they evaluate the bills before them with two critical questions: "How will this legislation promote student achievement?" and "What is the fiscal and administrative impact on local communities?"

With this lens, we can help ensure the strength of the partnership we have delivering the promise of public education to our state. And with this letter, I ask that you join me in thanking the 1,400 volunteer members of Connecticut's boards of education.

*Leonard Lockhart is a member of the Windsor Board of Education and Chair of the CABE Board of Directors.*