



ELEVATE · FUND · IMPROVE CAPSS Priorities for Connecticut Public Education: Looking Forward

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS) published a *Blueprint to Transform Connecticut's Public Schools*, a vision of continuous improvement coupled with a comprehensive, long-term set of recommendations for addressing the educational and fiscal needs of Connecticut's school districts. Progress on the recommendations was published each of the last three years. Coupled with the *Blueprint*, CAPSS put forward an annual public policy agenda with legislative proposals. The legislature and CAPSS accomplished much in strengthening public education in Connecticut in spite of the significant impact of COVID and its lingering effects on families, students and staff.

Looking Forward

As the 2025 legislative session nears, CAPSS is ever mindful of its mission:

"To lead the continuous improvement of public education for all students by advocating public policy for children, and by developing and supporting executive school leaders."

We believe it is time for CAPSS to revisit and reconsider its public policy priorities as well as its proposals for legislative action with the aspiration to address the current needs of all Connecticut staff and families. CAPSS believes in the ability of every Connecticut student to develop the knowledge, skills and character needed to succeed in their education, as well as in their adult life, as they become responsible and engaged citizens.

While there is much work to do to improve our schools, **let us never forget the** overwhelming success of public education in this country. Compulsory schooling for all, financially supported by all citizens and governments, has **enabled** dramatic social and economic mobility for millions of young people, generation after generation. Few other public or private enterprises can claim such success. Moreover, Connecticut Public Schools is one of the top systems in the nation.

In order to sustain the quality of Connecticut Public Education, we know that equal access to high quality instruction and to successful outcomes for all students requires teachers to develop a personal relationship with each student, differentiate instruction to meet individual student's needs and maintain continuous communication with parents and families. Moreover, we know that additional supports are needed for students with special needs, students of color, students living in poverty, students whose home and first language is other than English and students who are disengaged from school. Finally, it is essential that towns be able to provide sufficient budgets to enable high-quality professional development and support for staff, both professional and non-certified, and to have the necessary tools and supports to fulfill their assigned roles.

Today's students need to acquire the skills to read, write, speak, compute, innovate, engage in scientific inquiry, and work together to solve complex/real-life problems, but they also must develop a love of learning, an appreciation for the history of

this country, a respect for others and the importance of contributing to the betterment of our society. <u>All those involved in leading public education must</u> stay focused on continuously improving students' commitment to their learning and achievement and to ensuring that all students are treated equitably and with dignity.

THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION THAT HAS GUIDED CAPSS IN DEFINING ITS PRIORITIES GOING FORWARD IS:

What changes in CT Public Schools are imperative over the next 10 years that will result in greater success for every student?

CAPSS has chosen to focus on three essential areas for the next three years.

Elevating the Education Profession Raising the State's Percentage Share of Education Expenses Improving Pre-School Programs

The rationale for each of these priorities follows ...

Elevating the Education Profession

At the heart of any educational enterprise is the continuous, daily teacher-student interaction. Nothing is more important to the future success of public education in Connecticut than the quality of its teaching force. The need for a more diverse workforce is absolutely essential, as is listening to the voices of educators on how to improve and grow the profession.

However, physical and psychological conditions that teachers are often daily experiencing in our schools is of serious concern. Research studies conducted in the 2023-24 school year by the Pew Research Center, RAND, Kraft and Lyon and many others show teachers are experiencing increasing stress in their jobs including depression and burnout. Research is also suggesting that the overall health of the profession is at one of its lowest points.



Based on this sampling of data, the overwhelming need to elevate the education profession is imperative. Teacher mental health is essential, as is substantive and appropriate professional development. True professional educators have earned the respect of their communities due to their training, experience and genuine commitment to their students, but they need more support.

The salaries of Connecticut public school educators must be increased. The pandemic of 2020-22 helped prove how much education is harmed when there is no continuous, demanding and supportive teaching provided to each student. We are facing a crisis. There is a present shortage of teacher candidates, a projection of even greater shortages over the next 10 years, and a negative salary differentiation between the teaching profession and other bachelor's degree occupations.

A Historical Lens

Connecticut led the nation in 1986 with a Teacher Salary Enhancement Act (TSEA) that elevated all starting salaries and increased compensation to all teachers. It was also equity-based with greater state funds provided to school districts with the greatest need and the least local capacity to pay. For at least 20 years thereafter, the TSEA helped bring more highly-qualified young people into the public schools as teachers.

After the increase in teacher salaries, college students choosing education as their major had higher SAT scores than previously, and student achievement in Connecticut in the later 1990's, when compared to other states and the nation, was at an all-time high level.

It has been 40 years since the leaders of this state have taken the bold step to demonstrate "We want the best for our children". Today's students can and will do better than we have done if we invest more in their future NOW.

Nothing will advance CT public education more than elevating the entire education profession.

Raising total compensation, particularly for starting teachers in every town, must be at the center of all proposals. CT must also address the issues of certification, professional development, student teaching, teacher shortages, teacher evaluation, appropriate use of noncertified staff, the work hours of the day and year, advancement, mentoring, diversity and more. These factors are all part of the "total condition" of the education profession, and every one of them needs clarification and greater expectations.

CONNECTICUT'S RECENT EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN A FEW THOUSAND TEACHING VACANCIES ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. THIS IS VERY HARMFUL TO STUDENT LEARNING.

CAPSS RECOMMENDATION

The Governor and General Assembly should:

Enact legislation in 2025 that begins a twoyear Blue Ribbon Commission on "Elevating the Education Profession", including raising the salaries of incoming starting teachers, and improving the job satisfaction of all teachers with action expected in the 2027 session and implementation in the 2027-28 school year.

Raise the State's Share of Education Expenses

The State of Connecticut has made very little progress in the last 20 years in increasing the state's share of the total revenue for public elementary and secondary education. Hovering around 40%, annual increases from the State have barely kept pace with inflation and certainly have not provided for more equalized expenditures among school districts. While a good deal of more equity/fairness exists today than before Horton vs. Meskill, the total State funds (from all grants and State funded programs) are not sufficient to accomplish the task of helping the poorest communities, with the most challenged students, to close the expenditure and achievement gaps. (Local funds support roughly 54% and federal funds 6%).

In addition, local communities do not have sufficient resources to fund a multi-year raising of teacher salaries. The State must be prepared to initiate and sustain the increases.



With the full funding of the current Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula and grant to take place in 2025-26, it is time to fix a new target (which could include the required elevation of teacher salaries) that would move the State's total share of the enterprise to be equal to that paid by the 169 towns of CT. Of course, the annual increase in the ECS grant (or its successor) should be reasonable, sustainable, and of a size in each community so that it will be used appropriately on educational opportunities and NOT on property tax relief.

The single greatest failure of the last 25 years has been the inability or unwillingness to fund the promise of State support for the excess costs of special education students needing significant intervention. Virtually all of



the additional costs of special education for the last two-plus decades have been covered by funds from 169 towns. Sufficient funding for special education has been a very broken promise by both the State and Federal governments. This failure has harmed both special and regular education and has eroded the public confidence in the total public education enterprise. The ECS grant does not directly support special education, except in the most holistic view of all revenues supporting all expenditures. The State's Special Education Excess Cost grant should be increased to the level where all districts receive 100% of their calculated grant.

There are also critical needs in the following areas:

- Expanding multilingual programs,
- Merging and supporting several school improvement grants focused on Priority and Alliance Districts,
- · Rethinking the delivery of adult basic education,
- · Adequately funding the six regional education service centers,
- Continuing the quest for a fair and sustainable method of funding magnets, charters, vo-ag centers, tech schools and interdistrict choice programs.

These increases should be considered after both the new ECS grant and a fully funded EXCESS cost grant have been accomplished.

The State of Connecticut has a legal and moral obligation to appropriately fund its public schools.

Only the State can counteract the influence of local wealth on education disparities among towns.

The State will reduce inequities in its school funding system and increase student achievement only if it genuinely commits to significantly increasing state aid as a percentage of all revenues for public schools. It is essential to the future of Connecticut Public Education.

CONNECTICUT CONTINUES TO RANK IN THE BOTTOM QUARTILE OF ALL STATES, IN THE PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL REVENUES PROVIDED BY STATE GOVERNMENT.

CAPSS RECOMMENDATION

The Governor and General Assembly should:

1) Adopt a revised ECS formula with a new full funding level that more significantly closes the expenditure gap between rich and poor towns without reducing the current ECS grant of any town; and annually increase "the foundation" level of the ECS formula.

2) Provide sufficient funds for 2025-26 so that all towns receive in their Excess Cost Grant the full amount calculated, and paid earlier in the school year.

Improve Pre-School Programs

CAPSS has supported the growth and integration of programs for three- and four-year-olds for over 60 years, since the beginnings of Head Start in 1965. Moreover, CAPSS agrees with the long-range plan and recommendations of the CT Commissioner of Early Childhood and the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel, and supports the equitable compensation of early childhood workers as a number one priority. However, this will necessitate a major infusion of State funds. The state funding of pre-school began in 1997 as one response to Sheff vs. O'Neill, and funding grew for approximately 10 years. Unfortunately, but for federal funds, the State financial commitment to three- and fourvear-olds has been relatively frozen for the last 20 years.



CAPSS believes in the continued use of many providers: private and public, Head Start, school systems, etc., but with greater clarity around the role of local leaders, the capacity of local district leadership and greater use of the resources of school districts. In most communities, the "coordinating" role for serving three- and four-year-olds has been the School Readiness Council.

One new option is for the local school district to accept a broader role. This is important to achieve a clearly defined integration of preschool with the K-12 system. In order to reach each child, this "coordination infrastructure," with multiple providers, should be encouraged and supported. The State could provide new (small) incentive funds to encourage school districts, who so choose, to take on this broader role as directed by the readiness council and accepted by the Superintendent of Schools. The district could engage in: communications with families, data gathering, evaluation, professional development, and student assessments to enhance the quality of preschool and provide seamless integration from preschool to grade 12.

The content of the curricular programs for three- and four-year-olds should be clearly defined by the State in both the outcomes and the experiences for children. CAPSS also believes strongly in serving the whole child and the whole family, and advocates for wraparound programs and year-round approaches that often include Family Resource Centers, School Based Health Clinics and before and after school childcare services. Lastly, the recent statewide emphasis on early reading success makes coherent communication with all providers on the "science of reading" absolutely essential.

While Connecticut has been a leader, nationally, in serving an increasing percentage of three- and four-year-olds, it is imperative that the preschool experience be a quality one for every child in Connecticut.

State policy and leadership should focus its resources on the communities and families with the greatest need for preschool programs.

> CONNECTICUT'S EXPERIENCE AND SIGNIFICANT NATIONAL RESEARCH HAVE ESTABLISHED A DIRECT AND CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A QUALITY PRE-SCHOOL EXPERIENCE AND LATER STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGHOUT SCHOOL, FURTHER EDUCATION AND LIFE.



CAPSS RECOMMENDATION

The Governor and General Assembly should:

Begin the sustainable, annual and incremental implementation of the Blue Ribbon Panel's Early Childhood Plan, <u>and</u> add incentive funds for school districts willing and able to take on a community-defined broader role to enhance the quality of programs and build a better bridge to kindergarten.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Connecticut stands at a critical juncture in public education. The challenges ahead demand bold action, thoughtful policy reform and sustained financial commitment to ensure every student has the opportunity to thrive. These priorities are not just about improving educational outcomes; they are also about creating a more equitable, supportive and sustainable system that prepares all students for the future. Thus, CAPSS is recommending:

- Sustainably and annually increasing state funding for public schools,
- Supporting an appropriately compensated teaching profession with working conditions that re-kindle the joy of teaching,
- Serving better all three- and four-year olds through higher quality and more stable pre-school programs,
- Strongly supporting the powerful recommendations of Young People First in the Dalio Foundation's and CCM's report, particularly improvement in ECS funding, more community schools, and greater coordination among youth services' agencies, and



 Ensuring leadership, at every level, is committed to knowing every student, setting clear and high expectations, assuring accountability for improving achievement, and working passionately to ensure equity for every child.

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW.

By investing in our educators, ensuring equitable funding for all districts and supporting early childhood education, Connecticut can build on its legacy of excellence and lead the nation in providing a high-quality education for every child. CAPSS is ever mindful that the decisions we make in the coming years will shape the future of our State, and it is deeply committed to ensuring that the future is one in which every student can succeed, every educator is valued, and every community can flourish. Let us work together to make this vision a reality, because the success of our public schools will, ultimately, determine the future success of Connecticut itself.



CAPSS 2025 LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS

In the context of the longer-range CAPSS Priorities previously articulated, CAPSS believes that the following specific legislative proposals should be considered in the 2025 session of the General Assembly.

Elevate the Education Profession

To elevate education as a profession, there is a need to attract and retain educators, diversify the educator pool, improve the quality of educators' professional experiences, improve educator autonomy, and eliminate mandates that impact educator morale.

- RECOMMENDATIONS
- Establish a Blue Ribbon Commission to enhance and elevate the profession through a comprehensive two-year study of compensation, locally focused high-quality professional development, educator diversification, recruitment and retention efforts, and educator preparation programs.
- Create livable and competitive pay for educators, provided by the State, to ensure a widely diverse and highly-skilled workforce.
- Develop a committee that includes the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Teachers Retirement Board (TRB), educator preparation programs, educators, and other key partners to create a longterm workforce plan to address educator shortages and retirement trends.
- Provide grants for districts to invest in high-quality, ongoing professional development to enhance teacher skills and knowledge.
- Allocate \$3.5 million to continue professional learning for districts' leadership teams in the Science of Reading.
- Restore autonomy to educators by reducing legislative decisions and mandates that deprofessionalize the profession while preserving the autonomy of the CSDE.

Funding and Finance

Under the current funding model for the States' ECS Grant, 89 districts will receive increased support, while 70 districts will see reductions. Some districts are facing significant cuts to their state aid, affecting financially struggling communities the most.

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- Revise the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula to ensure equitable funding distribution and address the growing needs of districts.
- Hold harmless all districts for the 25-26 school year while the formula is reworked so that all districts remain whole.
- Increase the foundation from \$11,525, established in 2013 (10-162f), to reflect the impact of inflation on services provided to students and the education workforce.
- Fully fund Excess Cost Funding for Special Education to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- Incentivize the creation and maintenance of high-quality locally and regionally created educational programs for students.
- Monitor and review the impact of the Magnet School Tuition cap on district budgets and student access.

Supporting Early Childhood Education

Significant research has established a direct and causal relationship between a quality preschool experience and later successful student achievement through school and higher education. CAPSS supports financial assistance for universal preschool for all threeand four-year-olds in Connecticut, focusing initially on the communities and families with the greatest need for preschool programs.

- Consolidate efforts and increase funding for pre-kindergarten programs for all three- and four-year-olds whose parents are seeking access to high-quality early education programs across the state.
- Eliminate the kindergarten parent waiver so that all children have equitable access to kindergarten education across the state.
- Support marginalized families by studying the programmatic and financial needs in each community and offering tiered support to families close to the free-and-reduced lunch eligibility cutoff.
- Provide grants to Boards of Education to establish and implement partnerships to expand access to early childhood education by fostering partnerships with childcare providers and other districts by establishing pathways among the CSDE, Boards of Education, Office of Early Childhood, and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to more effectively support the needs of young children and their families.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT

Frances Rabinowitz Executive Director frabinowitz@capss.org (860) 236-8640, ext. 160



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