

# Ensuring Equity and Excellence for All Connecticut Students

The Connecticut State  
Board of Education's  
Five-year  
Comprehensive Plan  
2016–21



**ENSURING EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE FOR ALL CONNECTICUT STUDENTS**  
The Connecticut State Board of Education's Five-year Comprehensive Plan, 2016–21



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At the Connecticut State Department of Education,  
**students are at the core** of everything we do.

## OUR PROMISE TO OUR STUDENTS

- **Ensuring their non-academic needs are met so they are healthy, happy, and ready to learn.**  
(Mental health, nutrition, after-school programs)
- **Supporting their school and district in staying on target with learning goals.**  
(Education Cost Sharing - ECS, Alliance Districts, Commissioner's Network, School Choice)
- **Giving them access to great teachers and school leaders.**
- **Making sure they learn what they need to know to succeed in college, career, and life.**



## Acknowledgments

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### **CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

Dianna R. Wentzell  
Commissioner

Ellen Cohn  
Deputy Commissioner

Kelly A. Donnelly  
Chief of Staff

### **Communications Office**

Abbe Smith  
Director of Communications

Matthew J. Falconer  
Editor

Andrea N. Wadowski  
Graphic Designer

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Levy Gillespie  
Equal Employment Opportunity Director/Americans with  
Disabilities Act Coordinator  
Connecticut State Department of Education  
25 Industrial Park Road  
Middletown, CT 06457  
860-807-2071  
Levy.Gillespie@ct.gov





## Preface

Where equity is the mindset, equality is the result. All our children, regardless of their life circumstances, deserve an excellent education that helps them reach high standards of performance. The key to unlocking that potential in every child is ensuring that he or she is embraced in a culture of high expectations and learns from great teachers in a great school run by great leaders.

On a regular basis, the State Board of Education is charged with developing and releasing a comprehensive master plan for education in Connecticut. This blueprint sets forth the state's vision for education and provides a direction for policy considerations and administrative actions for the next five years that are designed to ensure that every student succeeds within that culture of high expectations.

In summer 2015, the State Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education recommitted to their ongoing efforts to pursue both excellence and equity for all Connecticut students. A team of professionals representing all six of Connecticut's regional educational service centers was convened and asked to design a plan for the Department of Education and the State Board of Education's practice over the next five years that would achieve this goal. The vision for this plan was that when completed, it would represent the Board's commitment to Connecticut's citizens and communities to support local public school districts' efforts to provide a great education in an outstanding school for every child in our state. It would compel all of us to act together to ensure that every student—regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, family wealth, zip code, or disability status—is prepared to succeed in lifelong learning and work beyond school.

As a planning process, *Ensuring Equity and Excellence for All Connecticut Students*, was designed to engage a wide range of diverse stakeholders, including the public and the State Board of Education's Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee, in an exploration of these issues to gain insight and perspective regarding their aspirations, challenges, and concerns pertaining to education in Connecticut. The State Board of Education engaged Connecticut's RESC Alliance to help design and execute a strategic planning process culminating in the SBE's five-year comprehensive plan. Over the course of several retreat sessions, the SBE determined the general direction of the five-year plan and developed inquiry questions to solicit feedback. With these questions, the RESCs conducted extensive stakeholder and public outreach, leading 46 focus groups across the state and analyzing approximately 6,700 survey responses. Details of this process and the results of the public feedback solicitation can be found in the companion guide *Equity and Excellence in Education for All Connecticut Students: Process Support Materials – Data Collection & Analysis Results*. The feedback received during this process helped inform and provide direction in the development of this five-year comprehensive plan.

The State Board of Education is committed to ensuring that equitable access and opportunities are at the forefront of our collaborative inquiry and collective responsibility. We are challenging and holding ourselves accountable to secure an excellent education for current and future generations of students in Connecticut through the intentional focus on the areas highlighted in this plan.

## Our Commitment: Equity and Excellence in Education

The promise of an excellent public education is to equip every child, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, family wealth, zip code, or disability status with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college, careers, and civic life. To deliver on this promise to Connecticut's schoolchildren, the state will provide guidance and leadership to districts so they can support great schools where great teachers and leaders hold high expectations for all Connecticut students. More specifically, that means:

- Every student deserves to benefit from the promise of **high expectations** and standards for what he or she can learn and be able to do.
- High expectations for all means that every student is expected to meet high standards and is supported by a system that believes in his or her ability to master challenging academic curriculum.
- High expectations are met by students when they receive personalized supports that meet their individual needs.
- **Great teachers and leaders** are supported throughout their careers with quality professional learning that continues to grow and refine educator practice.
- Great teachers enter the classroom learner-ready on day one.
- Great leaders are strong instructional leaders prepared to manage the complexities of a school on day one.
- Great teachers and leaders collectively reflect the rich cultural diversity in Connecticut and are culturally responsive instructors.
- **Great schools** are safe, diverse, welcoming environments where students thrive and receive exceptional teaching and learning.
- Great schools build strong community partnerships and authentically engage parents.
- Great schools develop well-rounded students and focus on student growth as much as on mastery.
- Great schools support the academic, social, emotional, and physical health needs of students so they can thrive.
- Great schools are not burdened or distracted by outdated or irrelevant mandates.

The 2016–21 plan identifies high expectations, great schools, and great teachers and leaders as three strategic priority areas and presents the rationale, actions, and anticipated outcomes for each.

If the State Board of Education, in partnership with the State Department of Education, is successful in developing and supporting the structures and conditions that create a culture of high expectations for all students, develop great teachers and leaders, and support great schools, then the results will be threefold: we will improve outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, and prepare well-rounded, engaged students who graduate ready to succeed in college, careers, and civic life.

While Connecticut students often outperform their peers across the nation, there are troubling gaps that must be addressed and closed. We believe that together the three focus areas this plan identifies will create the collective impact that will lead to better outcomes for all Connecticut children. This plan is designed to help Connecticut's





current top-performers continue to grow, while those who are working to catch up are enabled to do so and meet the same high expectations as their peers.

The spotlight on these three areas does not diminish the State Department of Education's other work, which is essential to supporting the success of our students. That work will continue in earnest and will be subject to continuous improvement efforts over the next five years.

With the creation of the Office of Early Childhood, many early childhood programs no longer fall under the purview of the Department of Education. However, the public survey conducted by the RESC Alliance in fall 2015 clearly shows that high-quality early learning opportunities for underserved communities remain a shared value and top priority for citizens across the state. The Department will continue to work closely and collaboratively with the Office of Early Childhood—and all state agencies that serve children and families from early childhood to college and career—to ensure seamless transitions for Connecticut students.

The success of this plan also depends on the commitment and efforts of critical partners at both the state and local level. To deliver fully on our promise to our children, state, local, and federal policymakers must share this common vision and work in concert on behalf of all students. Likewise, as the state creates the conditions and builds the structures to support the kind of innovation and bold strategies necessary to accomplish the dramatic results we all wish to see, it is imperative that school boards and district leaders take on these challenges locally.

While it is the Department's responsibility to define the broad structures and allowable pathways on a statewide level, it is the responsibility of the local school district and board of education to take the opportunity and make it come alive for every student in their care. Clarity of goals and expectations, aligned at the state, district, school, classroom, and student level, creates the coherence capable of overcoming the challenges before us. We are committed to working with our district partners to achieve the correct balance between support and oversight so they are free to do what is best for their own students to ensure each child meets the high expectations we have for them. This endeavor is our highest responsibility as a state and as a citizenry, as there is no more important aspiration we can have as a people than the future success of our children.

## High Expectations for Every Student

### Rationale

For each student to believe in and to realize his or her innate talent and value, we need to build and sustain an educational system premised on the core principle that, with the right supports and rich learning opportunities, every student will meet high academic standards. In other words, regardless of an individual child's life circumstances, we believe it to be a universal truth that all students thrive when we set the bar according to what we hope for them to achieve rather than allow them to be defined by the challenges they face along the way.

We owe it to our children to make sure that they receive an education that broadens their worldview and prepares them to thrive in a global economy and civic life. That is why Connecticut raised the bar and issued a new instructional roadmap—the Connecticut Core Standards—that will prepare our youth for college and careers. And in order to prepare our students to participate meaningfully in society and the economy, our schools need to challenge students to think critically and solve real-world problems. We will do a disservice to our students, however, if our response to this challenge is to narrow the scope of their learning to only core subjects.

For our students to lead successful, fulfilling lives, we must address not only literacy and mathematics but all the skills needed to provide robust career choices, including access to higher education, technical certifications, or other pathways aligned with student interests. To develop students as well-rounded, healthy, lifelong learners, our schools need to engage children in personalized, meaningful learning experiences across the curriculum. Over the next five years, Connecticut will deepen its commitment to higher, clearer academic standards and rich, well-rounded learning in core subjects and across the curriculum.

### Actions

The State Board of Education will take the necessary steps to support the following state actions that will advance a culture of high expectations for all students:

- Adopt and support the implementation of rigorous academic standards to prepare students to graduate ready to succeed in college, careers, and civic life.
- Work with all our partners to ensure that all students enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- Support early literacy success for all students ensuring that they are reading and learning at grade level by grade 3.
- Support the universal use of the Student Success Plan model to ensure that every student has a pathway to achieve his or her goals and aspirations.
- Work with our partners in higher education to ensure that secondary school academic expectations are aligned with postsecondary entrance and success criteria.
- Expand and strengthen relevant, well-defined, and varied career pathway options and programming.
- Support the implementation of mastery-based learning in local school districts electing to make the transition.
- Support expansion of access to high-quality math and STEM programming for all students.
- Support implementation of effective English learner (EL) programming and supports.
- Implement early warning and support systems for students at risk of dropping out.





- Coordinate a well-aligned system of student supports for the most vulnerable students.
- Work to encourage the meaningful engagement of parents and guardians as partners in support of every student's success.
- Ensure that every eligible student participates in the national school breakfast program.
- Develop recommendations and guidance that will improve outcomes and support the success of students in alternative education settings, adult education programs, and those who have experienced court support services, have been part of the juvenile justice system, or have been involved with the Department of Children and Families (DCF).
- Ensure that students are credited with appropriate, credible learning experiences that occur during periods when they are outside the jurisdiction of their local school district.

### Outcomes

The expected outcomes of these actions will help create and solidify a culture of high expectations for all students. In so doing, we expect that achievement gaps will close, outcomes will improve across the board for all students, and more students will enter college or the workplace with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

Besides tracking achievement, discipline, and chronic absenteeism data, in the coming years Connecticut will have:

- Implemented and identified best practices for math instruction at the district and school level and implemented recommendations of the Commissioner's Council on Mathematics and STEM.
- Implemented a statewide science mastery exam aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards.
- Adopted and implemented academic standards for arts.
- Revised and supported implementation of scientific research-based intervention systems that address students' academic and social-emotional development in every district.
- Increased the percentage of eligible students who participate in the national school breakfast program
- Supported district implementation of English language learning standards and best practices regarding EL instruction.
- Identified measures of key college and career readiness skills (i.e., critical thinking, problem solving, etc.) that currently are not reported on a statewide level.
- Incorporated additional career readiness metrics, such as industry-recognized credential attainment, into the state's Next Generation Accountability System.
- Increased numbers of students who receive college credit while in secondary schools.
- Reduced numbers of students requiring remedial services in postsecondary education settings.
- Decreased rates of chronic absenteeism, suspensions, expulsions, and student arrests through expansion of the school based diversion initiative (SBDI), or other restorative justice programs, and positive behavioral interventions and supports, while seeing an increase in utilization of Department of Children and Family's Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services (EMPS) in response to mental health crises.
- Increased graduation rates and decreased dropout rates.
- Increased rates of students enrolling in college.



## Great Teachers and Leaders

### Rationale

National studies have confirmed that, among the school-based factors that affect a student's growth, the quality of the teacher and principal has the greatest impact on student achievement. For our state to remain globally competitive and vibrant, the talent and skill of our educators must continue to develop. The State Board of Education's strategy for improving teaching and learning covers the full continuum of an educator's career—spanning recruitment, selection, preparation, evaluation, support, retention, and advancement of effective, diverse teachers and leaders—so that every student has access to excellent educators.

A strong teacher and principal corps starts with Connecticut's educator preparation programs—the universities and other institutions that train college students pursuing careers in education. The State Board of Education will work with and approve these institutions to ensure the recruitment of strong candidates and the preparation of strong teachers and principals so that new educators are learner ready when they arrive in the classroom. This will include a focus on expanding the pool of talented educators, and recruiting and preparing a more diverse body of teachers and principals.

At present, the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of Connecticut's educator workforce does not reflect the diversity of our students. We will work to build an educator workforce that reflects the diversity of the state. We will attract and retain effective teachers and school and district leaders of color, and offer challenging, rewarding, and enriching experiences at every stage of a teacher and administrator's career, improving retention of the most talented educators and facilitating the filling of high-need vacancies. We will also support culturally responsive educational practices that help all students engage in meaningful learning.

All teachers and principals continue to refine and improve their craft as their careers progress by engaging in professional learning. As the recent implementation of Connecticut's educator evaluation and support model matures, the focus of that system is shifting toward feedback for ongoing improved performance. Connecticut's system for ongoing professional learning has evolved from one of passive attendance at lectures to one of deeper and more meaningful learning, with teachers and administrators collaborating with colleagues. This type of rich, job-embedded professional learning better enables teachers and school leaders to increase their effectiveness and improve student outcomes. The new system for professional learning will entail training and technical assistance that makes educators' experiences relevant, rigorous, and meaningful.

### Actions

The State Board of Education will take the necessary steps to support the following state actions for the continuous growth and development of great teachers and leaders across their career continuum:

- Transform educator preparation programs to improve program completers' day-one effectiveness.
- Use recruitment, the educator evaluation and support system, and professional learning practices to develop and enhance the talent pipeline of diverse, highly effective educators.
- Recruit, develop, and retain highly effective school principals through high-quality pre-service training, induction programs, and continuous development opportunities.
- Strengthen efforts to ensure every student is taught by a highly effective teacher.
- Provide culturally responsive instruction through a deliberate focus on the instructional skills and wisdom required to meet the individual needs of all students.



- Remove needless barriers and build bridges to attract and retain top talent to serve in Connecticut schools and districts.
- Simplify and streamline the certification process for prospective in-state and out-of-state candidates.
- Monitor implementation of the Educator Equity Plan and minority teacher recruitment efforts to support districts in recruiting and retaining a diverse, effective educator corps.
- Review current professional development mandates to ensure the trainings are high quality, impactful, aligned to key priorities, and relevant to current academic and safety standards, which will culminate in recommendations to streamline, combine, or eliminate specific mandates.
- Develop and execute a plan for the implementation of the Connecticut Professional Learning Academy's professional learning standards that will provide training to key leaders involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating high-quality professional learning programs.
- Identify and support teacher leadership roles that allow teachers to help improve teacher practice across classrooms and schools while allowing the teacher to remain in the classroom.
- Support educators' professional development specific to mastery-based learning through communities of practice.

### Outcomes

The expected outcomes of these actions will support the continuous growth and development of teachers and school and district leaders, improve the diversity of Connecticut's educator workforce, and lead to better outcomes for students.

Besides tracking certification and employment data, the following indicators will also serve as measures of success. Connecticut will have:

- Implemented a new educator preparation program multifactor accountability system that informs program renewal, while also providing potential candidates with essential information on the programs' performances.
- Strengthened and expanded professional learning opportunities in alignment with the *Common Core of Teaching* and the *Common Core of Leading* standards.
- Increased numbers of teachers and leaders of color.
- Improved performance on key indicators of instructional and leadership performance.
- Convened educators and assisted in establishing professional learning communities for educators transitioning to mastery-based learning.



## Great Schools

### Rationale

Great schools are structurally safe, welcoming, and culturally responsive learning environments unencumbered by nonessential mandates where students meet their learning goals and where parents and guardians are engaged as true partners with meaningful voices. Unfortunately, many Connecticut students and schools in a variety of geographical settings face a multitude of challenges. However, we know—from examples across the state and country—that with high expectations, adequate resources, quality support services, strong leadership, rigorous instruction, and motivated teachers, we can build schools in which all students make dramatic gains and thrive. The State Board of Education, in concert with local boards of education, will provide intensive interventions and supports in Connecticut's most struggling communities by working to turn around low-performing schools and districts and by creating and sustaining strong school options for families.

As a complement to great traditional public schools, Connecticut's public schools of choice have a variety of educational programs that offer challenging, relevant, and rigorous curriculum and instruction, as well as creative and flexible environments that value each student's unique abilities, talents, interests, and learning styles, regardless of racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds. Public school choice programs, which include magnets, open choice, state and local charter schools, vocational-technical schools and programs, and agriscience and technology programs, are powerful tools for meeting the needs of students and families and for reducing racial, ethnic, and economic isolation, consistent with the integration goals established by the landmark *Milo Sheff, et al. v. William A. O'Neill, et al.* case.

In order to ensure all Connecticut students acquire the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in college, career and civic life, the State Board of Education is committed to deepening its support of districts transitioning to mastery-based systems of learning,

with students demonstrating mastery through tests, portfolios of work, exhibitions of learning, and multidisciplinary presentations. Additionally, districts will be supported in their implementation of personalized learning strategies that incorporate technology, differentiated instruction, and experiential learning.

Measuring every school's progress is an important part of our effort to strengthen all Connecticut schools, giving every learner a well-rounded, world-class education that prepares him or her for college and careers. Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System greatly enhances the public's access to information and data on schools and districts, helping inform local boards of education and other stakeholders regarding the education system in their communities. The Department will identify schools' strengths and areas for improvement and hold the system accountable for student learning.

### Actions

The State Board of Education will take the necessary steps to support the following state actions to build and sustain great schools:

- Propose legislation or regulatory changes to dramatically reduce onerous and outdated red-tape burdens and eliminate barriers that stifle educators, schools, and districts.
- Ensure that there is appropriate testing to assess student learning, making sure that there is a balance between the information required to ensure accountability and the information parents need.
- Celebrate our most successful schools and educators to highlight programs and strategies that are working and thereby disseminate best practices to districts and schools that need help in that particular area.
- Convene a Commissioner's Parent Council to ensure that parent voice is directly engaged regarding the Department's policy and programmatic priorities.



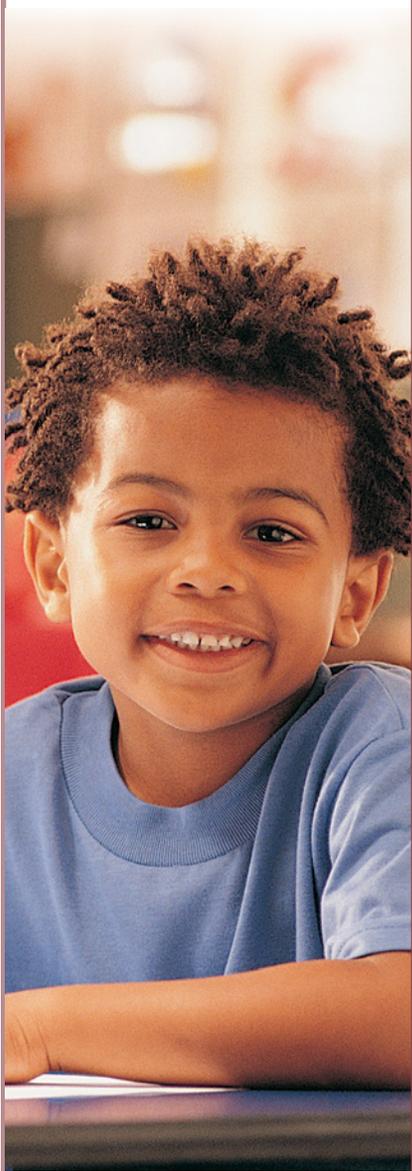
- Support and develop authentic opportunities and experiences for meaningful parental engagement by building capacity for families and school staff to partner effectively in support of student success.
- Provide greater resources to those with the greatest need in exchange for increased accountability to ensure funding supports evidence-based improvement strategies that will lead to dramatic improvement in student outcomes.
- Remove administrative barriers, recommend policy changes, and provide top-notch support for local boards of education that elect to move toward mastery-based learning.
- Promote competitive programs that will build on the Department's efforts to spur reform, expand opportunity, and drive better outcomes for students.
- Develop a comprehensive plan on interdistrict magnet schools that places them in an appropriate context with all the other public school program offerings available to parents and students in the state.
- Ensure that equitable access, equitable funding, and accountability measures are achieved among all Connecticut's school choice programs, including vocational-technical schools and programs, regional agriscience and technology programs, open choice programs, magnet schools, and state and local charter schools.
- Implement a district and school accountability index that measures performance relative to equity and excellence, includes multiple, holistic indicators, and incorporates student growth.
- Implement a district and school accountability system of differentiated support and supervision designed to help each school or district get the assistance it needs to fulfill its educational promises to its communities.
- Strengthen and expand supports and resources for districts to design and implement mastery-based learning and personalized learning systems.

### **Outcomes**

The State Board of Education expects these actions will build stronger, better schools and communities that will improve outcomes for all students and close the achievement gaps.

Besides tracking school and district performance through the Next Generation Accountability System and implementation of the Alliance District and Commissioner's Network programs, the following indicators will also serve as measures of success. Connecticut will have:

- Recommended and implemented improvements to parent-engagement supports informed by the Commissioner's Parent Council and School Governance Councils.
- Reviewed state and federal grant opportunities and aligned grants to strategic priorities, ensuring optimal impact on improved outcomes for students and fostering innovation.
- Deployed a new data portal to provide the public with timely aggregate reports, and to provide teachers and leaders with secure reports with actionable information.
- Empowered state and local decision-makers to develop their own robust systems for school improvement that led to improved outcomes for all students.
- Seen more schools graduating out of turnaround status and more schools and districts reducing their achievement gaps.
- Launched an online repository of valuable tools, including resources for parental and community engagement, to assist local school districts to plan for and implement the transition to mastery-based learning.



## Conclusion

The State Board of Education's comprehensive plan for education over the next five years will position us to deliver on the promise of a public education to every child in Connecticut by focusing on three priority areas: high expectations for every student, great teachers and leaders, and great schools. Succeeding in the implementation of this strategic plan will improve the outcomes for many students who need our support the most. It will create the room for students and schools that are already succeeding to soar higher and help make sure all students experience the full benefit of rigorous preparation for life after high school.

While the responsibility for implementing this plan squarely rests with the CSDE working in cooperation with local school boards of education, districts, and schools across the state, this plan belongs to the residents of Connecticut. We are grateful to the thousands of Connecticut parents, students, educators, local school board members, policymakers, and community members who attended meetings, participated in focus groups, and responded to surveys, and whose contributions helped inform the development of this plan.

Progress toward accomplishing the defined outcomes will be incorporated as a complement to the annual Condition of Education report to empower families and residents to hold the state accountable for making good on our promise. As the plan is implemented, the Department will ensure that all work across the Department is aligned to the vision and goals articulated here. The Department will continue to approach the work with a growth mindset and find areas for efficiencies and improvements thereby resulting in stronger leadership, clearer guidance, and improved delivery of service to our students, schools, districts, and families.

We look forward to the work ahead to implement this plan and to our continued partnerships to improve outcomes for Connecticut's children.