

Connecticut Coalition *for Justice in* Education Funding



POSITION STATEMENT

ON

The Connecticut Plan: Academic and Personal Success For Every Middle and High School Student

CCJEF congratulates the State Department of Education, the Ad Hoc Committee for Secondary School Redesign, and the State Board of Education on a forward-looking, research- and best-practices-driven, results-focused reform plan aimed at preparing secondary school students for the challenges of the 21st century, increasing graduation rates, and closing the achievement gap.

The Connecticut Plan significantly raises the curricular, instructional, and performance standards that all public middle and high schools will be expected to meet, thereby also raising the bar for high school graduation. In general, we concur with the plan's goals, which center on meaningful student engagement, acquisition of 21st century skills, and rigorous course content.

- We especially like the individualized success plan and capstone experience for every student and the raised expectations for both pre-service teacher training and the professional development of experienced teachers and administrators, but we also note that each of these carries significant added costs.
- We decry the scaling back of the intended 2-year world language requirement, in light of the growing multicultural nature of American society and the importance of foreign language competency in a global economy.
- We have serious reservations about the proposed end-of-course exams, which will add still another very costly testing element to the state's accountability model, further result in a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on what's being tested, and seemingly force every community into a cookie-cutter pattern of educating the increasingly diverse students they serve.
- Similarly, we fear how such changes may negatively impact students with greater than average learning needs, such as those from low-income households, English-language learners, or students requiring special education services. As Connecticut's unconscionable achievement gap clearly shows, these students have long been left behind, and there is little in *The Connecticut Plan* that holds any reasonable promise of "catching up" these young people so as to ensure ample opportunity for their success at the secondary school level. The mere act of raising graduation standards, increasing content rigor, and adding still more testing is not a panacea; in fact, such an approach without the necessary resources can and likely will have just the opposite effect.

As Commissioner McQuillen points out, significant new resources will be necessary to accomplish the plan's goals. Even within many DRG A and B districts, we believe that additional instructional staff, classroom space, technology, and other materials will be necessary, and increasingly so as one moves down the DRGs. Indeed, school districts in DRGs G, H, and I will be highly impacted by these reforms — on the positive side, the intention is that student performance may be improved as a result of the new mandates, but on the resource side, these are districts that sorely lack the basic resources for serving adequately their high-needs student populations and whose towns already contribute far beyond their fair and reasonable ability to fund the local schools. Already, in many of these districts resources are so limited that an alarming proportion of their elementary, middle, and high school students are unable to meet even the state's lower NCLB performance standards, and graduation rates in some of these districts are shockingly low. Raising secondary school and graduation standards within these school districts without first successfully bolstering the performance of their K-5 students, beginning with adequately resourcing those districts, sets students and schools up for even greater failure at the middle and high-school levels.

While CCJEF salutes the State Department of Education for its efforts to estimate the considerable costs associated with this reform plan, we believe that the estimates of additional resources (staffing, facilities/space, technology, materials) needed to implement the plan and the resulting cost of those resources — at both the state and local district levels — are unrealistically low. Even were the estimates reasonable, there can be little confidence attached to promises of future funding by future legislatures. Sadly, the State of Connecticut has a long history in education funding of broken promises to its schoolchildren, school districts, cities and towns.

The Connecticut Plan represents a major step toward state control of public education, i.e., the further centralization of education power and weakening of control by local boards of education. Yet we perceive no concomitant shift of the state to assume its rightful lion's share of funding of our public schools. To attempt to reform an educational system from the top end of the grade span without first and/or simultaneously also raising the quality of education in the lower grades risks exacerbating the very goals of this plan. Further disheartening and imperiling students in low-performing districts by failing to provide the resources needed to “catch them up” to the level of performance needed for their success in higher education and today's workplace is certainly not what any of us want to see as an unintended consequence of raising standards and increasing rigor. Yet, we fear that within the context of the state's overall underfunding of education, implementing *The Connecticut Plan* could place thousands of currently low-achieving urban and rural students further at risk of disengaging in their education and dropping out of school.

Higher standards and expectations commensurate with the social and economic challenges of the new millenium, yes — but first, we need in place a 21st-century education funding system!

Unless and until we have adequate and equitable state aid for the public schools, this erstwhile promising reform plan will surely remain, like the state's many other fine small-scale interventions, merely a symbolic gesture that exemplifies big-picture thinking on a penny-wise, pound-foolish state education budget.

Hartford, October 7, 2008