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Educational Advocacy Group Recommendations to the Connecticut State Department of Education in Response to Covid-19 Educational Crisis

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Underlying Principles

Public education will undergo a fundamental change as we move through the COVID-19 closure to some form of school reopening. We need to use this opportunity to re-imagine public education in Connecticut to make it more equitable, more effective, and more accessible. Doing so will require that decision-makers identify underlying principles that will guide the decision-making process and the decisions themselves. We, a broad and diverse group of educational advocates, recommend:

Educational equity must be a foundational principle and ultimate goal of all decisions. The Connecticut educational system is obligated to serve all students, regardless of race, income, disability, language, country of origin or sexual identity. The fact that Connecticut has 169 towns and over 200 local educational authorities cannot serve as a basis to undermine the fundamental principle of equity.

Educational decision-making, both on the State and on the local level, must be conducted with transparency, accountability and timely communication with families and teachers.

Educational initiatives must be supported by the resources that students, families, teachers, administrators, and municipalities will need to implement recommendations for equitable educational service delivery. Every decision should include specific and explicit discussion of resources.

Students have basic needs for food, shelter, child care, health care, internet connectivity and mental health support. Without ensuring basic needs are met, the state cannot ensure that all children can access education.

Leadership Team/Governance and Advisory Structure

The transformation of our education system catalyzed by the current pandemic necessitates the creation of a robustly constituted state Taskforce, working in concert with and supported by data from state agencies and with the feedback and participation from all relevant communities. Such a State Taskforce must incorporate meaningful input from those closest to the problem, including school and community representatives, school board members, administrators, teachers, parents, students, legislators, people representing and working with vulnerable and under-served children and families, and health officials, along with experts in child development, child

engagement, professional development and technological innovation.

Such a Taskforce needs to have the a defined role for the Legislature, ensuring bi-partisan participation as well as a vehicle to secure the fiscal resources needed to implement the recommendations considered by the Taskforce.

The Taskforce and any related working groups and sub-committees will need meaningful representation from under-served and vulnerable populations, including low-income youth, children of color, children with disabilities, and English language learners. All work of the state and its taskforces and sub-committees must be done openly and accountably, with a public record.

The Taskforce must review how other child-serving systems and industries (e.g day cares, home care, disability support services) are addressing the present and upcoming service delivery and health challenges. The Taskforce (and the public) will need data, for example, on how many day cares are open and serving how many children and with what protections reliably in place and with what public health outcomes, positive and negative. How many families and children are DCF staff meeting with face-to-face and with what challenges and public health outcomes? The same data and information should be ascertained from other public and private agencies in the child-serving or vulnerable-population-serving systems so as to inform the framework for safe re-opening of our service systems, and ensure providers of educational and other services have the support and protocols and resources they need. The data should be collected, interpreted and reviewed over time, with clear responsibilities delineated for the Department of Public Health, so as to inform decision-making over time and permit course corrections as needed.

The Taskforce can learn from community-based providers and teachers about what innovative strategies they are using to fulfill their mission and responsibilities, provide a continuum of services, and keep the lights on in their businesses. The public will need to have information regarding the mission, methodology (including data collection and review) duration and work of any appointed groups as they advise the Governor in navigating the present crisis and its impact on the health and welfare of children, families, and individuals.

Oversight and Accountability – Setting and Enforcing Expectations

The Taskforce will partner with the State Department of Education, which can assess state and regional educational needs and community conditions over time, help establish standards and a quality assurance structure for service delivery and assessment of educational participation and progress, and collect and disseminate best practices, setting expectations, overseeing implementation efforts, and enforcing expectations potentially long-term.

The State Department of Education needs to create a system of mandatory data collection on student engagement during the closure and re-opening. Such a system requires common definitions of student engagement, participation and progress monitoring, differentiated by age, race, district, English Language Learner and disability status. The State will need an accurate look at who is getting what and a method for tracking student participation and progress as soon as possible.

The State Department of Education needs to issue mandatory instructions, as well as guidance, to ensure that the post-COVID educational system meets the goals of equity, effectiveness, and access. The Department will also play a critical role independently and in conjunction with the Taskforce in ensuring development, dissemination and enforcement of best practices throughout the implementation of Connecticut's new educational system.

Engagement with Students and Families

In the distance learning or hybrid distance learning environment, the need for effective student and family engagement will be paramount. The Taskforce should, in partnership with the Department of Education, develop and publish guidance and toolkits for student engagement, inclusive of blueprints for how districts can use available district staff or contract with private agency staff, to support this critical work.

Engagement strategies will need to be differentiated by age, developmental and disability status and risk/need cohorts. For example, what works for a family with a child who is significantly disabled may be different than the strategy used to engage a family whose children have a history of chronic absenteeism. The needs of families with young children are different than the needs of families with high school students. Districts will benefit from guidance regarding how they can, mindful of privacy concerns, partner with private agencies and non-profits to outreach and support vulnerable cohorts of children. School staff require professional development in the area of student engagement, training which may come from community-based agencies whose daily work involves supporting higher need populations.

Addressing Students' Basic Needs

While the current Connecticut Reopening Advisory Committee has been charged with developing a framework for “re-opening” school, this work cannot exist outside a larger context of health, safety and wellbeing: e.g., how well are families’ basic needs being addressed. How effectively is food and housing security being addressed, for without these essential services, children cannot learn?

The Taskforce’s work will have to overlap with state efforts ensuring individual and families’ basic needs are met for food, household items, shelter, diapers, hygiene products, clothing, child care, Internet connectivity and basic income. Children living in a family whose basic needs are unmet will be significantly less likely to be able to engage with or even access education.

Child Wellbeing, Social Emotional Learning, and Child Safety

The state must provide specific attention to the safety, mental health and social-emotional needs of children and families, with special attention to the risks and traumas caused by this pandemic and quarantine. Safety, social-emotional wellbeing and mental health are foundational for children along with basic need supports. School districts, as key partners in the social-emotional development and protection of children, must be supported and empowered to help assess the wellbeing of students now and moving ahead. This will require a creative approach to assessment and intervention, informed by children and families and experts from school districts, mental health agencies and DCF.

The state and the Taskforce must review sources of information regarding children’s safety and wellbeing to help enhance methodologies for distance learning, student engagement and hybrid-education. Information from child welfare professionals, mental health professionals and child development experts can help the Department of Education and the Taskforce fully understand the impact of school closures (or partial closures) on the development, mental health and physical safety of children. Input from other sectors of our child-serving and human service systems will be needed to make informed decisions over time regarding how to meet children’s educational needs safely and adequately.

Technology to Support Access to Remote Learning/Hybrid Education Is a Civil Right

As we know, not all students have the devices necessary for remote learning and access to the Internet. Many children in rural and urban areas are not able to access education during this pandemic. The state should identify meaningful access to tele-supports (health care, education, social connection) as a basic civil right. There should be a statewide plan for ensuring that all households have the devices and connectivity to access the support that they need to utilize education and healthcare. This goal should be accomplished as quickly as possible and should be a top state priority.

Professional Development

Prior to COVID, few, if any teachers or administrators had any formal education in distance learning. We have learned a lot in the last eight weeks. We need to distill and crystalize what we have learned and use it to train teachers and other school personnel in supporting meaningful, longer term socially distanced education. Ongoing professional development and dissemination of best practices, in conjunction with resource allocation and a structure for accountability, will be imperative.

Recovery Services

Federal and state messaging on compensatory education has been contradictory and confusing. The Department of Education needs to put out clear, legally-supported guidance so that students will get the remedial help they need and we are not deluged with a flood of due process claims. While many students will need remedial support and transition help, under the IDEA, students with disabilities are legally entitled to an individualized program based on their present level of performance. The state will need to make clear that students with disabilities are entitled to remedial instruction on reentry, without regard to any fault on the part of the school district and without regard to the parent’s level of capacity to facilitate distance learning.

Transition Services

The state will broadly need to deal with special education students who are in their final year of eligibility. Services need to be extended for all such students so they can get the transitional services they need.

Juvenile Justice

Supports for incarcerated and detained youth are desperately needed and require dedicated dollars, attention and accountability. Youth in justice facilities are not accessing meaningful education at this time. Incarcerated and discharged youth will need to be prioritized for intensive engagement and remediation and, where applicable, compensatory education. A framework for accountability will be essential.

Contributing Organizations

AFCAMP

The Center for Children's Advocacy

Commission on Women, Children Seniors, Equity & Opportunity

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance

Connecticut Legal Services

Greater Hartford Legal Aid

New Haven Legal Assistance Association

Office of the Child Advocate

SEEK CT (Special Education Equity for Kids)

The Village for Children and Families