

July 10, 2020

**CONNECTICUT'S MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND REOPENING SCHOOL:  
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EQUITY, OPPORTUNITY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

We are a coalition of attorneys, advocates, community providers, and parent leaders committed to vindicating the interests of Connecticut's most vulnerable and underserved children and youth. We came together in the wake of the COVID-19 school closure to reduce the alarming educational disparities that have been further exposed and exacerbated by this crisis. We need to confront the systemic racism that undergirds our educational system, and address the needs of low income children and children with disabilities in our state that too often go unmet. Many of these children are also grappling with significant emotions in response to the wave of racial justice protests and we must recognize that children do not begin their educational day in a vacuum, free from the painful impact of outside events. We share this message with the hope that the State will no longer accept the traumatic effect of racism and poverty on the lives of children, and take immediate steps to ensure that all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender/sexual orientation, immigration status, language, and disability, can access their civil and constitutional right to an education. To this end, the undersigned coalition recommends that the legislature urgently convene a special session that addresses the needs of children and includes the following agenda:

1. **Internet access is a basic need and must be ensured as an essential service needed to access children's fundamental right to healthcare and education.** As schools shut down, thousands of low-income children were left without any education because they had no internet access, creating **an educational and moral crisis**. While some students had regular access to educators, including access to live instruction, others languished with no computer access or teacher support, and no meaningful access to education at all. The State must have a clear strategic plan of action to address this basic need.
  - **The State must declare it is responsible to ensure that all students have high speed internet access.**
  - **The State must commit to providing all students whose families qualify for public assistance with a device, high speed Wi-Fi, and technical support necessary to access health care, including mental health care, and education.**
  - **The State needs to develop a public dashboard reflecting progress towards student connectivity.**
  - **State funds already allocated for a Dalio Partnership match should be used to offset the cost of this initiative.**
2. **The State's responsibility for children's equitable access to education cannot be deferred.**
  - **The State Department of Education must provide public standards and data about educational opportunity, equity and participation during the period of school closure that includes data and input from parents and caregivers.**
    - The State must adopt a clear and high standard for educational engagement, such as "completes grade-level and developmentally appropriate assignments

on a weekly basis and participates in synchronous learning sessions, including regular communication with teachers and relevant related service providers.”

- **SDE should quickly commission, from a reputable private survey research firm, a scientifically valid parent/youth survey** that specifically gathers information about opportunities provided during school closure, families’ and youth’s ability to engage with what was provided, and their input as to what worked and what didn’t. Participation and opportunity data must be disaggregated by district, race, grade, disability status, and English Language Learner status.
  - What educational services did vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, really receive? How many children had regular access to teachers and other school staff? How many children had access to live instruction? How many children had access to classes with their classmates? How many had only paper packets and no materials or computers to support their learning?
  - How many children with significant disabilities really had no access to their educations? How children of color with disabilities had no access to education?
  - How many children experienced basic need barriers to educational participation?

The data is essential to ensure adequate recovery services for all and compensatory education for children with disabilities, but also to plan for the likelihood of a return to online learning. The planned return to school, if actualized in September, does not erase the State’s responsibility to compensate for the losses experienced by low-income children and children with disabilities. And, students with disabilities should have an Individualized Education Plan that specifies the services to be provided if the school returns to distance learning.

3. **The State must develop an equity and accountability task force to support reopening and student participation, that includes a specific mandate to address systemic racism’s impact on education and lost opportunity for children with disabilities.**
  - **The equity and accountability taskforce *must include* parents** and parent advocates/representatives, youth, community providers, and educators, as well as legislators and State officials.
  - **The taskforce will analyze barriers** to student participation, develop standards and oversight mechanisms regarding student opportunity and engagement, and make recommendations to the legislature and the Governor to ensure equitable education for all children.
  - **The taskforce must have a public agenda and create a public record of its work.** The public needs transparency and accountability.
  - **The taskforce must be constituted rapidly and have clear deadlines for issuing public findings and recommendations.**
4. **The State must provide school districts with the money needed to reopen schools with robust attention to the health, including mental health, of staff and students.**

- **School districts can't go it alone.** They need resources to ensure the health and safety, including the emotional wellness, of their communities. A deference to the status quo leaves all districts struggling, but none more than those serving low income and high need children, particularly children of color. Currently, Connecticut school districts with over 50% Black and brown students spend about \$15,000 per student, while districts that are more than 95% white students spend nearly \$20,000 per student. This is clearly structural racism and must be ended.
  - **Student and educators' health, including mental health, are foundational.** It is essential that districts are supported with the resources they need to implement not only the safety protocols required for reopening, but also to address the social-emotional needs of their school communities, staff and students alike.
  - **State achievement testing must be reduced, while curricular requirements and teacher evaluation criteria must be revised** to ensure emphasis on social-emotional wellness and development.
5. **We must address exclusionary discipline policies and police in schools, practices that disproportionately harm children of color and students with disabilities.**
- **Replace the investment of police in schools** with school counselors, mentors, social workers, and other support staff to assist students and teachers in schools. The legislature should set minimum staffing ratios for support positions, adjusted for students living in poverty or requiring special education. The State should examine Justice Reinvestment strategies from other jurisdictions that have successfully reduced youth incarceration as a model for change.
  - **Prohibit police officers (school resource officers) in schools,** and redirect local dollars to positive school climate personnel and restorative practices. School resource officers should not be used to deal with in-school behavior.
  - **Support school staff with training and resources to increase their capacity to serve their students and meet classroom expectations.** Many teachers in high need districts may struggle with their own vicarious trauma, worsened by years of straining without adequate resources to serve and meet the needs of their students. The State can't support vulnerable students without supporting their teachers.
  - **Replace punitive exclusionary sanctions (suspension and expulsion), persistently felt by children of color, particularly children with disabilities,** with therapeutic interventions in the school building. School safety can be preserved by individually working with high need students and providing them with the mental health counseling and emotional support they need.
  - **Create a data reporting system on school district referrals to the police** and publish the data to create a disincentive to routine reliance on law enforcement in lieu of investment in students and teachers.
6. **Children cannot learn until their most basic needs are met.** As the State moves to reopen schools, we must acknowledge the catastrophic impact deprivation has on the development and wellness of children.

- **Ensuring housing security for all who need it by extending rent and utilities relief** must be an urgent priority for the legislature and the Governor's office. The State's recently announced relief program is a good step, but greater funding will likely be needed to ward off a crisis of homelessness.
- **Ending hunger for all children, including our undocumented children of color.** Too many children, including infants and toddlers, unnecessarily face hunger day in and day out. The legislature must compile all available information regarding food insecurity in the state and take all steps to end hunger for all children, ensuring food assistance is accessible to undocumented parents and their children.
- **Rescuing the childcare industry must be a top priority.** With the childcare industry teetering on the verge of collapse, the legislature and Governor's office must immediately plan for distribution of additional financial support to day care operators and increase Care 4 Kids subsidies to families in need of child care.

**Signed,**

AFCAMP

Bernard Thomas, Hartford Knights Organization

The Center for Children's Advocacy

Christina Ghio, J.D.

Clifford Beers

Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance

Donna Thompson-Bennett, Alumnae Bridgeport Parent Leadership Training Institute

Gwen Samuel, Connecticut Parents Union

Millie Arcieniegas, Hartford Parent University

The Office of the Child Advocate

SEEK CT

The Village for Children and Families