

NEWS

Connecticut Department of Education

Dr. Mark K. McQuillan
Commissioner



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Back-to-School Message

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Beginning next week, **571,210** public school students will arrive at the schoolhouse door to begin the 2007 school year. This includes a projected 39,000 graduating seniors who will constitute the largest graduating class in two decades; and about 14,000 children in public preschool programs which – in combination with independent readiness programs around the state-- guarantee nearly 80 percent of eligible 3- and 4-year olds a place in a quality pre-school program this year.

We enter this school year with:

- A student population that is 66.8 percent white, 15.5 percent Hispanic, 13.8 percent black and 3.5 percent Asian-American;
- Approximately 30,000 or about five percent of our students who are limited English proficient
- 68,300 or 11.8 percent of our students who will be receiving special education services
- More than 150,000 or 26 percent of our students who qualify for free or reduced priced lunches
- About 45,000 certified teachers—28 percent of whom are eligible to retire today, and more than 40 percent of whom are eligible to retire in the next 10 years
- 20.1 percent of students scoring below basic on 3rd grade reading and 21.3 percent of SAT test-takers who score over 600 on reading.

Connecticut is a great state with a strong educational system. However, for the past several months we have heard the voices of concern in state government and in our business community that our schools are no longer at the top of the national charts in student achievement and that we not preparing our young people to succeed on the college campus or in the workplace as we must. Despite the hard work of educators, we have not improved at the pace that other states have. We need to do things differently to ensure our state's position as a national leader.

This is why the Governor and Legislature provided the largest increase in ECS in the past 20 years – more than \$180 million in new funding to help improve our schools. However, with this support, comes an expectation for change. We are at a critical point in our state's history where we can take important steps forward regain our leadership in the nation in fostering student achievement.

The State Board has embarked on a critical reform agenda that will focus on three key areas:

- Expanding preschool opportunities for all students
- Restructuring High School
- Closing the Achievement Gaps while improving the performance of all students

The state department of education has reorganized and will be working with school districts more closely to improve achievement and to turn-around schools that are not seeing progress.

The expansion of preschool opportunities, particularly for low income and minority students is an essential priority for improving achievement and closing the achievement gaps. As Co-Chair of the Governor's Early Childhood Cabinet, I am hoping to continue Connecticut's work to build the systems needed to provide access to a high quality preschool education to all 3- and 4-year olds by 2015. The foundations provided by such education will go a long way in helping children enter Kindergarten with the experiences and language skills needed ready to learn to read and negotiate the first three grades of schools successfully.

On high school reform, the State Board has formed a study committee that has been working over the summer months to make recommendations on restructuring Connecticut's high schools. These recommendations will go to the State Board of Education this fall and then to the Connecticut General Assembly for proposed legislation in the 2008 session.

We believe that an important part of the equation is to improve reading skills particularly in the early grades. Thus the Department will set forth a Reading Agenda that will include a prime focus on what we need to do in our state to improve reading instruction and strengthen reading performance. We plan to organize a **Statewide Reading Summit** to bring the best minds from research labs, board rooms and from classrooms to inform our work on how to proceed. Connecticut needs a **Reading Renaissance**, and we need to focus our efforts on preparing teachers AND parents to bring this about. These are important steps to take as we work to regain our place as a top performer in the nation in student achievement.

I wish our students, our teachers and the families we serve the very best as we begin this new school year. We will need to work harder and smarter to bring about change; and we need to work together with parents and community leaders to achieve these goal.