



May 11, 2020

Dr. Miguel Cardona
Commissioner of Education
450 Columbus Boulevard
Hartford, Connecticut 06103-1841

By email and First Class Mail

Dear Commissioner,

Thank you so much for participating in the SEEK Webinar on Inequity last Friday. During the webinar, individuals posted questions and comments, many of them concerning matters not directly related to educational equity. To ensure you receive the benefit of these comments, we enclose them here, edited and reorganized.

Educational Opportunity versus School Days

As Connecticut is counting these days of distance learning as days of education opportunity rather than school days, how does this factor into the IDEA and compliance with the IEP to the maximum extent possible?

Delivery of Educational Services During Closure

What is going to happen to those students who are part of the self-contained classrooms, how will they continue to get services?

PPTs

Why is the advice of the Commissioner to School Districts to put off annual review PPT's until the fall when only two months of the school year have been part of the pandemic? Some districts are still refusing to hold PPT's. This is a huge concern with addressing and discussing planning for re-entry.

Access to the Internet

Bridgeport is the largest district in Connecticut, and we don't have universal internet or laptop's and Chromebooks district wide.

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Will we make a commitment to allocate CARES Act education funds to ensure that every student has an adequate device and internet connectivity?

Student Engagement

How do you envision helping students that have devices and connectivity, but given their special needs, they are not engaged at all? Factors can be: diagnosis, parents/caregiver sick, parents/caregivers at work, lack of engagement and “packet” approach, etc.

Families can't be engaged if they are not proficient in English and are not provided interpreters or translated documents. The disparity is widening and is not being addressed

Paraprofessional

What is going to happen to paraprofessionals if there won't be any summer school sessions? Also throughout the next school year?

In addition to teachers, support staff (paraprofessionals, intervention specialists, behavior technicians) should also be looked upon as part of team in the educational needs of our students. During this pandemic, there has been some reports of support staff having to choose between losing job or pay cut unless they have face to face with families. Very difficult.

Funding

Will the state be more willing to monitor how the funds for students are being spent by municipalities?

How would any Federal or State Aid be allocated to districts in CT? ALL districts are struggling with the costs of providing SPED services to students and ALL towns are struggling with budget constrictions due to job losses, etc.

Will there be additional funds made available for compensatory education for those of our children with special needs who are demonstrating regression during this pandemic?

FERPA Compliance

Parents need evaluations in their native language. Districts telling parents no documents will be produced until school doors open. Parents need documents now so they can understand their child's present levels of performance. Is there any guidance on this issue?

Can CSDE provide guidance to districts regarding use of the health or safety exception to FERPA to provide directory information about students who are not participating in distance learning to community partners who stand ready to assist with engaging families?

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In-Person Instruction

When schools reopen, are there going to be in-person instruction plans that protect our most vulnerable and medically fragile students or will they have to continue in a virtual format that is going to continue not to meet their needs?

1:1 instruction must be contemplated and a safe plan (if at all possible) developed. Decisions and a plan regarding this type of instruction can be made in partnership with state and local agencies serving high need individuals (e.g., home care; DDS; DMHAS). Currently, even under the shutdown there are certainly pockets of 1:1 services being provided. A staggered return to in-person or hybrid education must absolutely examine how assisted education can be implemented in a safe way. Many children with disabilities are not accessing education at all at this time.

What about the support people need to have with children with behavioral problems?

Consistency

The amount of variability across districts in implementation of distance learning for all students, and in particular the most vulnerable, is unacceptable. How will CSDE contribute to higher and more consistent standards?

How do you address the issue that a district gives students virtual learning at the discretion of the teacher which creates inequity for those students whose teachers decide not to deliver virtual instruction?

We need to create a standard definition of educational engagement and participation and develop supports for educators to facilitate that engagement along with a framework for data collection and accountability. This should be part of the work that the state's governance and advisory structure, in consultation with SDE, helps to construct.

How will the CSDE contribute to higher and more consistent standards? How will CSDE move to enforce these standards (rather than just issuing guidance)?

Long term planning should be based on accurate data. It is my understanding that the CSDE is not requiring uniform data submission on distance learning access and engagement. What steps is the CSDE taking to ensure that decisions about equitable access is based on accurate data?

The fact that there IS such a disparity from district to district further reinforces the importance of the CSDE providing consistent directives to districts!

Direct, Synchronous Instruction

Most districts are not providing direct, online instruction to students. Many parents, particularly in urban districts, are working full-time and are unable to support their children with independent work (which is what most districts are providing). Will we ensure that teachers provide direct, synchronous instruction to students? This could also help with social connection.

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When Distance Learning Does Not Work

I have a child with a learning disability. She is having a hard time with distance learning. What options that you suggest when parents need extra support?

Extended School Year Services

When will the state make a decision regarding ESY and the possibility of in person ESY?

With ESY programs set to continue as distance learning, will there be any additional resources available for children who require more hands-on assistance? I am thinking of the possibility for home services?

Staggered Reopening Schedule

Will you please say more about what you mean by a staggered schedule in September?

Parent Training

What will CSDE do to encourage districts to provide comprehensive parent training, especially in how to deliver distance instruction, including accessing technology?

What recommendations can you provide to assist our parents who are struggling with Distance Learning? Has anyone provided a tutorial on a weekly basis for parents via ZOOM?

Teletherapy

Are districts doing anything creative to offer special education services for students who were used to receiving speech and language, OT, and PT services under normal/in-person circumstances?

Priority Return to Classroom

If students return in the Fall in a new format, for example split between morning and afternoon sessions, will special needs students be provided with full day education? This is a population who needs full day education.

Can children with special needs be given priority access for return to classroom instruction? Same question for those who do not have access to internet or equipment for virtual instruction?

Could we consider a phased in approach regarding physically returning to school buildings? Prioritize the students with special services that could not be effectuated during quarantine. That is OT/PT, Speech, etc.

Outplacement

Can the state and districts learn from state approved private schools to better meet the needs of special ed students who cannot access public school education during distance learning? Can these students be outplaced for purposes of distance learning only, so they can receive FAPE?

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How can parents of the highest need kids, kids who cannot be effectively served in their district, compel their districts to outpace to appropriate settings outside the district now when doing so prior to COVID was difficult at best? It's about safety in home, school and in community, as well as social-emotional learning, academic achievement to support lifelong success? Parents cannot educate these kids when the school district can't do it. Early trauma exposure is at the root of this question.

Regression

How is the Bureau of Ed planning to address the inevitable regression of ALL students-especially those in underserved populations?

Healthy Educational Environments

My husband and I are both special educators and have a 4-year-old that is severely medically compromised. She will NOT re-enter school without a plan in place. I will not risk her health.

Social Emotional Learning

Trauma informed education, taking this into account as we address discipline moving forward!

How do we help parents with the emotional support to continue to educate their children, when they themselves may be facing economic changes such as loss of jobs?

Teacher Training

How are you training the teachers for effective distance learning? Are you working with the colleges and universities in creating a curriculum course structure for this?

504 Students

I feel lost as a parent of a child with a 504, and am concerned about others in the same boat. I hope for inclusive conversations honoring these students as well.

As you know, at SEEK we are committed to ensuring that the voices of parents of students with disabilities are heard. Your participation in our panel discussions, and your willingness to review the attached, are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

Barbara Distinti
President