



SEEK-CT Position Paper:
Reopening Schools while Reimagining Education *
May 21, 2020

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant school closures have disrupted all of our lives. Simply put, the economy cannot recover unless schools are reopened. And, schools cannot be reopened unless it is safe to do so for students, teachers, parents, bus drivers and numerous others.

The closure has spotlighted the inequity in the state. Many Connecticut families lack basic economic protections, a living wage, food security, decent housing, affordable health care, connection to the Internet, etc. Distance education cannot work when the student lives in a household that cannot meet the student's basic human needs.

We do not know what the full impact of school closures will be on our students. We will have to help our children process loss and alleviate any anxiety while at the same time, help them to recover from the educational loss caused by the school closure. Remediation -- both educational and emotional -- is certain to be an intensive and expensive enterprise.

Still, the education system, as it existed pre-March 13 was seriously flawed, particularly for students with disabilities, English Language Learners, students of color, residents of urban districts and students growing up in poverty. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress's (NEAP) Nation's Report Card, only 12% of 8th grade Connecticut students with disabilities were at the proficient level or above for Math, compared to 45% of non-disabled students. Only 13% of 8th grade students with disabilities were at the proficient

* This Position Paper was drafted as a collaborative effort among the SEEK Board of Directors and members of the SEEK Legislative Committee, along with input from important stakeholders in the advocacy community. SEEK wishes to acknowledge and thank Gerri Fleming for her incredibly hard work in drafting the original and her patience in incorporating the numerous edits offered by her colleagues.

level or above in reading, compared to 47% of non-disabled students. The numbers for non-disabled students are unacceptable. The numbers for disabled students are a scandal.

Education should remain one of our foremost priorities. Done right it is the most powerful equity and economic tool to advance our State.

Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK) is an organization of parents, providers, attorneys and advocates committed to advocating, educating and legislating to protect and enhance the rights of students with disabilities. SEEK offers short-term and long-term recommendations.

SHORT-TERM

Need for State Department of Education Direction

Connecticut school districts are moving forward designing plans for reopening school in September with virtually no guidance or direction from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). Each district is considering a range of options from a continuation of distance learning to some form of in-school learning, while conforming to the social distancing requirements published by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Governor. If this current process is not interrupted by clear, prompt and specific direction from CSDE, Connecticut could start the next school year with radically different school schedules in neighboring districts. This will lead to serious confusion and anger among parents. For a teacher who teaches in one district but lives in another district, it could well lead to an impossible situation.

CSDE needs to issue binding guidance setting the parameters for school reopening. Such guidance needs to be issued promptly. Three months is not enough time to plan for all the complications that will arise from a hybrid school schedule. School districts, in consultation with staff, students and parents, will need to deal with a plethora of issues including bussing, the responsibility of nurses, the use of paraprofessionals, hygiene, social distancing, face-covering, pre-school testing, counseling, shut-down plans, and more. Every day CSDE waits to issue mandates further impairs the ability of school districts to plan for an effective educational program at the beginning of the next school year.

In this circumstance, the issuance of the sort of vague guidance that CSDE has issued to date about the closure is wholly inappropriate. Having school districts with sharply different reopening plans will cause confusion and hostility. Further, it will not permit an effective restart of the economy, as the ability of parents to return to work will vary from district to district. Binding mandates are needed and needed immediately.

Need for Funding

Compliance with the CDC social distancing, testing, hygiene, and personnel protection recommendations will be extremely expensive propositions for local school districts. Limiting classes to no more than 10 students will require more teachers and more space. Social separation will require far more busses and creative use of space within buildings. Custodial staff will need to be increased to perform the extensive and repeated cleaning required. Testing will mean more

nursing staff, even while schools already face a shortage of teachers. The upsurge of interest in retirement by older teachers will necessitate further hiring and training of teachers.

Reopening schools is critical to restarting Connecticut's economy. Doing so will require a substantial investment of new public funds. The \$111 million that Connecticut received under the CARES Act is not earmarked for school reopening. Even if it were, the sum is insufficient to implement a responsible reopening plan. Further funds are needed.

Priority Access to In-School Learning

Starting over the summer and continuing to the beginning of the school year, schools should provide full-day in-school education to certain special student populations, prior to opening school to all students. In fact, opening school to all students on September 1 may well be beyond the capabilities of most school districts. In-school instruction for the special student populations would require parental consent and there must be no penalty or deprivation of educational opportunity to students whose parents refuse to consent. The special populations include both those students who have the greatest learning recovery needs as well as those students whose parents need to work to keep society going. The priority populations would include:

- a. Students with IEPs;
- b. Students who are English Language Learners;
- c. Students who had limited access to devices or Internet connection during the period of closure;
- d. Student who, for whatever reason, failed to access distance learning during the period of closure;
- e. Students whose parents are essential workers, to include teachers, health care workers and those involved in the production, transportation, or sale of unprepared food; and
- f. Siblings of the students described above.

Full-day priority in-school learning should continue even after schools are open to other students, without regard to whether those other students attend on a part-day basis.

Return to In-School Learning

Along with addressing viral containment issues like test/track/trace, contact reduction, use of masks, cleaning and disinfecting, etc., schools need to implement a diagnostic screening period while students are still home but just prior to the return to school. All schools should screen students to determine their needs, so that those needs can be addressed once school reconvenes. This universal screening is to determine re-entry readiness of all students and should include:

- Physical Health screen. This would include testing for COVID-19, temperature checks, and a review of the student's health history during the period of closure. This part of the diagnostic screening could be done by a family pediatrician, much as the annual health

forms are completed now prior to school admission. This screen should also assess the ability of a student to wear a mask for an extended period of time.

- Social-Emotional status, especially any exposure to trauma or adverse experiences during the closure-death of a family/friend, loss of family income, food and housing insecurity, loss of social support, loss of routine, etc. This screen should include the student's social skills functioning, as well as the student's response to the loss of structure that school provided. This screen should assess the level of the student's engagement in the educational process during the period of closure.
- Academic screening to establish current baselines.
- Structured parent and student interviews to gain insight, perspective and experience with distance learning. The structure of the interviews, together with a form on which to record answers provided, should be set out by CSDE to ensure that the interviews are comprehensive and meaningful.

The results need to be documented. In the case of a student with a disability, the results would be presented to an IEP Team meeting to design an individualized program and placement to remediate any loss in functioning. For other students, the district would be expected to design and implement programs to remediate loss. The results would need to be carefully compared to the data that existed prior to the closure. Moreover, any data on progress collected by the parents or produced by an outside evaluator during the period of closure would need to be considered. Students with disabilities will need to be formally reevaluated through the processes established in IDEA should the screening show marked changes.

Schools must also be ready for students. Professional development needs to be mandated for teachers in Social Emotional Learning approaches; especially to recognize, respond to and accommodate responses from traumatized students, to utilize culturally-responsive trauma-informed class management strategies to reduce the disproportionate number of disciplinary classroom exclusions of students of color and students with disabilities and to prevent the misidentification of those students as needing special education for emotional or behavior disorders when something else is at play. Further, teachers and other school staff themselves may need emotional support, since many of them have suffered traumas during the period of closure as well. It is clear that some returning students, who have lacked the structure of school for months, will be behaviorally dysregulated upon return to school. Schools will need to hire additional behaviorists and Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) to work with these children.

The current regime of testing needs to be relaxed. Even pre-closure there was far too much testing, both externally imposed standardized testing and curriculum-based testing. Testing is not education; it is a means to measure the effectiveness of education. As schools struggle to regain their footing, testing should be largely suspended.

Alternative educational arrangements should be considered. In many areas of Connecticut, a regional approach could help deal with the space shortages that social distancing will impose on schools reopening.

School Attendance

Schools need to recognize that even though schools may reopen, some students may not be able to return to in-school learning due to health concerns regarding potential viral exposure either to the health of the student or of a vulnerable family member, or due to the student's inability to practice the face covering and social distancing required in school. Moreover, some students may not be able to effectively participate in classroom activities because of social/emotional issues, or deterioration of social skills. COVID-19 is a stealth virus with many people, kids especially, acting as vectors of the spread while remaining asymptomatic. CSDE needs to put out guidance that referrals should not be made to the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the police or the courts in cases in which the family feels it cannot safely return their child to school. Instead, schools should continue with distance learning for those families. Where possible, schools will need to make plans to reintegrate certain students into the classroom while providing distance learning during the process. At the same time, schools need to redouble and refocus their engagement efforts to ensure that all students remain in contact with the school.

Remote Learning

Distance education has been substantially unequal during the closure. Connecticut needs to invest in technology and connectivity, along with training of teachers, students and parents in the platforms used for instruction, to promote equity. No student should be without a connected computer. A device and connectivity are basic human rights in our society. Technology can supplement teaching by providing access to a wider range of texts and materials than can reasonably be stored in a school building. It can allow for remote teaching when in-person learning is impossible. It can assist with more personalized learning and progress monitoring. Yet, it cannot supplant effective in-person teaching, especially for certain learners. Providing technology is not the end game, it is the start of the game; but without it, students have no access. They are locked out of the game.

Remote learning requires different skills for curriculum design, instruction and assessment than more traditional in-class learning. A tremendous amount of knowledge has been developed during the period of closure. That knowledge needs to be spread. Educators will need to learn how to integrate technology, software, and applications into their teaching. Teachers should be trained to provide direct, synchronous instruction to students, and this type of instruction should be a substantial component of distance learning. CSDE should create a research arm to study the effects of hybrid learning, both through the use of aggregate data and through the investigation of the experience in individual districts. Additionally, a tremendous amount of knowledge has been gained through the last two months of distance learning. CSDE should serve as a clearinghouse for this information making it available both to educators and to parents.

Virtual learning must also include a system of accountability; quality and time standards must be developed and strictly enforced. Schools should operate five days a week, especially during any period of school closure. The school day should not be reduced to a couple of hours for students. The learning mode and methodology must be responsive to the student's needs. When schools first closed, districts and teachers were understandably caught off-guard. What

was acceptable in the initial response to remote learning cannot be justified months in and certainly not for a potential second wave. Packets of busy work are not acceptable; a weekly phone call to check-in is insufficient; posting an assignment on a platform or via email is not teaching; yet all of this is still the norm for too many kids.

Parental support has been identified as another barrier to distance learning. Under IDEA, the law that guides the implementation of special education, parental training is one such provision of the Act designed to assist parents in understanding the special needs of their child, to provide parents with information about child development, and to help parents acquire the skills to allow them to support the implementation of their child's IEP. We need to provide a robust program of training for parents. A Parent Training section should be added to the IEP form that is currently being revised. It should be a required discussion at every PPT meeting. In the best of times, parents are their children's first teacher. In this time of pandemic, parents have become the default team of teachers and support personnel. They must encourage persistence, manage behavior, assist with organization, teach concepts and skills, oversee technology issues, and implement all aspects of the program, if they have the luxury of being able to work from home. In doing so, they necessarily have to ignore their own responsibilities to work and home.

Students and their parents need training in how to use and troubleshoot the technology as well as how to navigate the particular programs. Parents of students with disabilities may also need training in other areas, too—the disability of the child, the teaching interventions, behavior strategies, related services techniques, social skills and/or executive function coaching. Parent training is a related service under the IDEA. In the post-closure period, it should become the norm, rather than an exception. Assistive technology experts, both with school districts and employed by the Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs), should be utilized to provide technology training to teachers and to parents.

Responsibilities of CSDE

The State should be looking into curricular offerings designed for an online platform. Applications and programs that have shown promise should be vetted for wide distribution. Assessments via computer will focus less on the recitation of facts and more on the analysis and synthesis of content. To the extent that some of these assessments have been written by teachers already, they need to be saved for future use by a wider audience. The State should create a repository of online lessons, projects and assessments to allow for common curricular experiences across the state to increase the equity among all districts.

To date, the Guidance issued by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) in response to the pandemic closure has sowed confusion and amplified division between parents and schools. In the face of a shared challenge, incoherence from leadership and a lack of transparency caused trust to erode. The decision of CSDE that days of distance learning were not really school days and the IDEA processes to ensure FAPE did not apply to those days was unjustified, violative of the IDEA, and destructive of sound education. Moreover, the failure of CSDE to issue binding mandates, rather than vague guidance, has resulted in enormous diversity within the State, such that some districts are still not holding PPT meetings. Distance learning plans are not memorialized in writing, let alone as part of an IEP. Parents were not consulted in

designing the plans, let alone treated as equal decision-makers in the process. Data is not being taken. FAPE is not the standard. Going forward, Connecticut has to do better.

LONG-TERM

Reimagining Education—Getting the Schools Kids Need

In the last two months, the delivery of education has changed more than it has in the last 150 years. But more change is necessary in order to have the education system that works for all of Connecticut's children and benefits the social and economic health of our state. We need to proactively plan for the change we want, not back into it in reaction to a pandemic.

The pandemic has exposed the stark reality of the level of inequality in Connecticut. School funding in Connecticut comes primarily through local property taxes, with a state-funded system of equalization grants used to reduce the blatant inequality between Connecticut's towns. Yet, the equalization funds come nowhere near the level needed to equalize funding. And, students from poverty require greater, not less, educational support than do students from wealthy communities. We have a social and moral responsibility to educate all the children in our State, together with a Connecticut constitutional obligation to do so. The vast disparities between and among districts were magnified when schools closed.

The State's education funding formula should include equity-based supplements for high-needs populations within a district for those who are English language learners, students with disabilities or students living in poverty. Beyond the funding formula, however, the total amount of State funding for education needs to be substantially increased.

Universal preschool should be made available. Students growing up in poverty begin behind their wealthier neighbors, socially, academically and developmentally. The gap starts early and keeps growing. Access to quality preschool programs is limited to those who can afford it. But for every dollar invested in preschool programs for low income students, there is a many-fold return on investment from increased educational attainment, earnings and tax revenues as well as decreased costs for special and remedial education, unemployment, welfare, substance abuse treatment, and criminal justice in the longer term.

Children from affluent homes have a leg up on achievement. They are provided with various programs of after school enrichment and remediation--tutoring, sports, lessons in the arts, etc., because their parents can afford to invest in these extra supports for their children. Over the summer break, they may attend private camps, or have private tutors to provide remediation, enrichment and accelerated learning. Older students may attend pre-college programs. Affluent parents do not view the above as extra, but rather they are viewed as essential. These positive circumstances, by and large, promote achievement and advancement. Such benefits are not available for those who cannot afford such educational enhancements.

Race and ethnicity also play a large role in what President George W. Bush referred to as the "soft bigotry of low expectations". This is most obvious in the universe of special education. For a wealthy white student in a suburban community, special education means additional services and support. For a black teenager in a city, special education means segregation and reduced education.

We can mitigate some of the inequity and positively impact outcomes through a change in policy that would allow structural changes to the school schedule and calendar. Education should consist of longer days and shorter summer breaks. The opportunities afforded to the children of affluent parents should be available to all as shared experiences for the children of Connecticut. Many children would benefit from school day hours that mirror a typical workday for parents. Longer school days could allow for more learning time of core subjects. More importantly, the longer time would permit time to be spent on activities that enrich, remediate or accelerate learning and increase student engagement. The longer day could allow for more informal play time and recreational opportunities. Social Emotional learning programs could be expanded and given the appropriate focus and attention. For students with disabilities, it could give more time toward both structured and informal interventions. For English language learners, more time in school means more exposure to English. Longer school days would help level the playing field between rich and poor. This is not a proposal for more of the same. We need to focus on improving the quality, scientific-basis, and accessible of education. Lengthening the school day will not be effective if the quality of the education remains stagnant. Simply providing more services that have not proven effective is not a path for success. Educators must be given better training in the effective educational techniques. More importantly evaluations must be used to inform teaching methods and approaches, not just to determine the existence of a disability.

We also need to rethink Extended School Year Services (ESY) for children with disabilities served under IDEA. We need to use the summer as the time to close Connecticut's yawning achievement gap. Summer after summer, the opportunity to close the gap for students with disabilities is squandered as school administrators mistakenly believe that ESY is only for the maintenance of already-learned skills. CSDE has failed to hold districts to account as ESY offerings are insufficient in number, quality and duration. Committed professional educators at every level should demand more of themselves and expect more from students.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 school closure has caused a major disruption in the lives of many Connecticut citizens - teachers, parents, students, and others. It has also provided us with an unparalleled opportunity to redesign the educational system in Connecticut. We must find a way to get students back into in-person learning promptly, but safely. We must collect and share the knowledge that we have gained during this period of remote instruction and use this knowledge to create better education for the future. We must confront, with purpose and intensity, the pernicious inequality in the State. And, moving forward, we must not strive to return to the failed educational system that existed prior to the closure. Instead, we need to use the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to create a new, vibrant, effective, and inclusive education for the future.