

Final Report of the Goal 2 Working Group

Fine by Nine: All Children Healthy, Safe and Successful in School by Age 9

Revised Overview May 5, 2008

I. Overview

This report by the Goal 2 Working Group of the Early Childhood Cabinet is designed to complete the Cabinet's Early Childhood Investment Plan, *Ready by Five and Fine by Nine*. Tasked with creating a framework for the result "All Children Healthy, Safe and Successful in School by Age 9," the committee's co-chairs, Fran Rabinowitz, Associate Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Education, and Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, convened a group of experts representing six Connecticut state agencies and many stakeholders, including classroom teachers, school principals and superintendents, experts in reading and teacher training, researchers, and advocates. Work began in December 2006. During the fall of 2007, Fran Rabinowitz left SDE to become the superintendent of schools in Hamden. She was succeeded as co-chair by Charlene Russell-Tucker, Associate Commissioner of the State Department of Education.

The original report of the Goal 2 Working Group was submitted to the Early Childhood Cabinet in December 2007, and the Cabinet adopted the six strategic areas of the report in February 2008. At the request of the Cabinet, the co-chairs reconvened the team leaders of the six strategic areas to identify priorities within each strategic area and to make recommendations for action to the Cabinet. This revised report is submitted in support of the Goal 2 Working Group's strong consensus regarding the most urgent issues that require the attention of the Cabinet, state agencies, schools and school districts, communities, and families.

The working group's efforts have taken place over the last 16 months in a time of increasing attention to flagging test scores for Connecticut's students in reading and the persistence of Connecticut's "achievement gap," the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The term "achievement gap" is most often used to describe the troubling performance gaps between African-American and Hispanic students and their non-Hispanic white peers, as well as the similar academic disparities between linguistically diverse students, students with disabilities, and students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and those who do not. The achievement gap shows up in class grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates. It has become a focal point of many education reform efforts within the state and in the nation as a whole.

The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results show that the Constitution State's achievement gaps in reading and mathematics for all disadvantaged groups are among the largest in the nation. On the fourth grade reading and mathematics tests, for example, Connecticut has the largest difference in academic achievement between poor and non-poor students of all the fifty states. On the eighth grade reading and math tests, the results are the same: Connecticut has the largest gap between poor students and their wealthier peers. In a competitive global economy, the gaps measured by NAEP, Connecticut Mastery Tests, and other standardized tests translate into an unaffordable loss for the students involved and for their communities.

The cost to our society and our democracy has become insupportable. Connecticut is 45th out of 50 states in long-term job growth (Corporation for Enterprise Development 2007); has the second highest juvenile incarceration rate for Hispanic males and the third-highest rate for African American males (Office of Justice Programs 2004); experienced the largest increase in income inequality in the nation since 1988 (Economic Policy Institute, U.S. Census Bureau 2006); and, in 2007, for the first time ever, will spend more on its prisons than on its public higher education system (Office of Policy and Management 2006). If we allow this trend to continue, Connecticut's capital, both human and economic, will suffer.

The causes of poor school performance are complex. Children who come to school from communities with a high incidence of poverty have a higher risk of learning difficulties in school. More children are entering the schoolhouse with English as their second language. Some have had no experience in preschool. Still others have parents or guardians who are not literate themselves. Many schools have had difficulty responding to the academic and social needs of poor students. Similarly, many schools have been unable to appropriately respond to the diverse linguistic abilities of children and the physical or cognitive disabilities of all learners. Socio-economic factors, when not addressed appropriately, may contribute to the early academic difficulties that are reflected in state reading scores.

These factors define the context in which the education of our young children must take place. Daunting as some of these socio-economic challenges may be, however, they do not mean that educational failure for these students is inevitable or acceptable. Rather, they make it all the more urgent that we look critically at what we have yet to do in our communities and in our public institutions, especially in our schools. Much study has taken place in Connecticut and around the country to determine what makes schools successful. The good news is that we know what works and what we must do. The question is whether we have the will to do it.

II. Highlights of the Six Areas of Strategic Focus

The Goal 2 Working Group is proposing six key and interrelated strategic areas that, when pursued in concert, will “turn the curve” on early school success:

- *highly effective staff teaching*
- *healthy children to be*
- *fluent readers, with*
- *family and community support, in a*
- *safe and welcoming school environment guided by*
- *dynamic school leaders.*

The six preceding concepts summarize the work of six subgroups of Goal 2 Working Group members who are experts in these content areas. The six subgroups are as follows: Reading Achievement; Health and Safety; Family and Community Involvement; Highly Effective Staff; Connected Students, Welcoming Schools; and Leadership in Creating a Professional Learning Community. What follows are the highlights of each group’s work. Reading is presented first because it is the most critical issue that we must address immediately. The full report of each work group is presented in Section V.

1. Reading Achievement

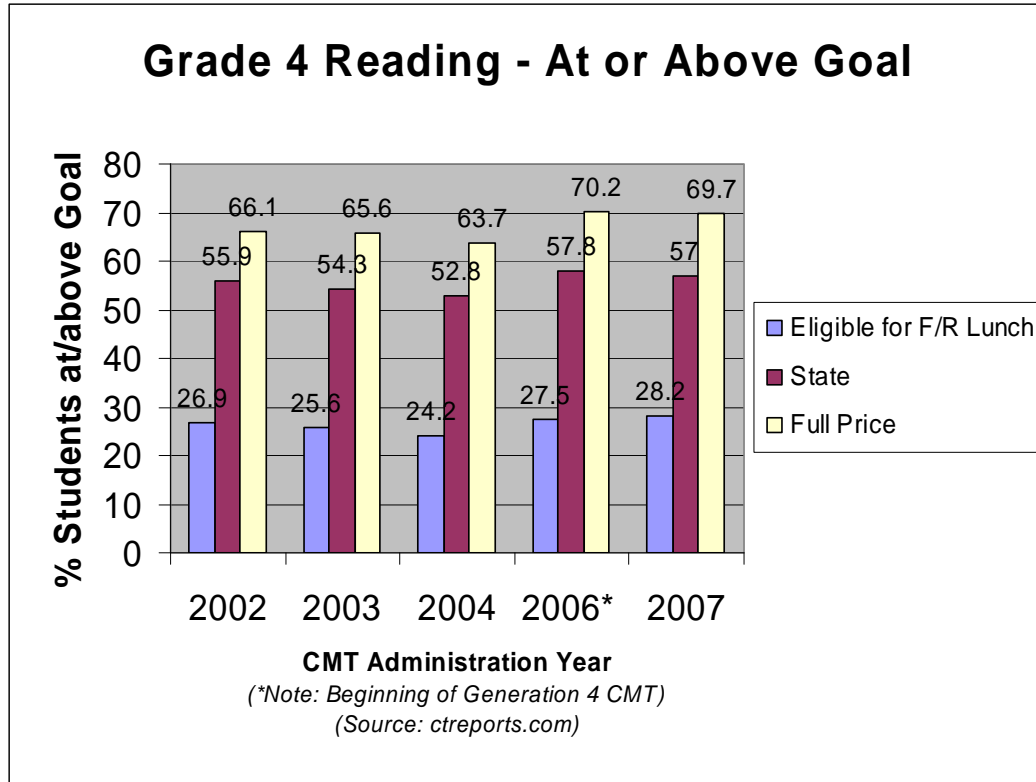
Research indicates that if children do not become proficient readers by age eight, there is a greater likelihood that they will be struggling readers throughout the rest of their school careers and into adulthood (Lyon, 1996). The National Institute for Literacy reports that 43 percent of individuals with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty, and approximately 70 percent of prisoners function at the bottom two out of five literacy levels (National Adult Literacy Survey).

Numerous national and state level analyses of reading achievement indicate that there is a high cost for reading failure. Connecticut’s alarming achievement gap means that this failure is most acute in communities with high proportions of poor and minority children. But reading failure affects all Connecticut communities because it translates into citizens who cannot fully participate in society or the workplace. With renewed urgency, Connecticut must first acknowledge that current strategies and practices employed to increase reading scores have not produced acceptable results and then move forward using the best educational research to devise an innovative, comprehensive, and coordinated plan that calls for critical actions by *all* stakeholders in shouldering the responsibility for high-quality literacy instruction.

The legislature has given the State Department of Education broad new power to ensure accountability and to intervene in school districts in need of improvement. Each district and school should be accountable for reading achievement and should immediately implement and enforce the new statewide education accountability plan. Critically, we

need to ensure that all teachers have the content knowledge and pedagogical skills needed to be effective teachers of reading and that faculty members at Connecticut’s institutes of higher education employ proven, research-based methods of instruction.

How We Are Doing



What Else We Would Like to Measure

Percent of students in grades 3 and 4 meeting expected performance on the state’s CMT Benchmark Assessments.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Hold each district and school accountable for reading achievement by immediately implementing the State Department of Education statewide education accountability plan, including quality reviews of schools and the use of corrective action plans. Ensure that each school fully implements the key findings of scientific research in reading instruction as delineated in *Connecticut’s Blueprint for Reading Achievement: The Report of the Early Reading Success Panel*.
2. Implement a statewide pre-certification test of teacher training candidates on their mastery of evidence-based reading instruction for raising student achievement, including the goals and competencies delineated in the CT Blueprint and the systematic use of student achievement data to guide instruction.
3. Require schools to work with External Literacy Facilitators (literacy coaches) to provide direct assistance to teachers in applying proven reading methodology.

Shorter-Term Actions to Help Us Do Better

1. Require formative assessments in reading for all students in K-3 to inform and ensure differentiated instruction.
2. Research and apply effective instructional strategies for English Language Learners in the teaching of reading.

2. Health and Safety

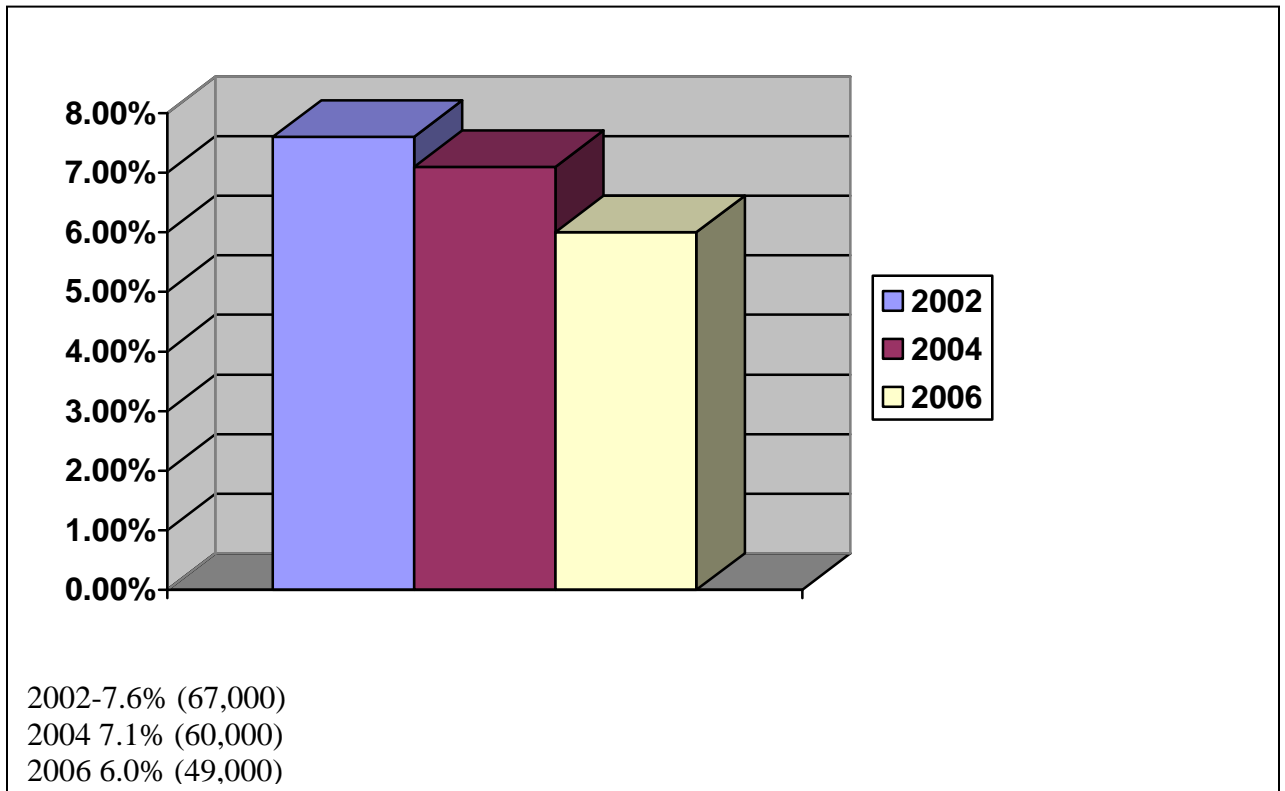
According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, health and safety are the most critical elements to human beings. If these basic needs are not met, then higher order skills can not be accomplished. As the American Cancer Society points out in its *National Action Plan for Comprehensive School Health* (1992), "Children who face violence, hunger, substance abuse, unintended pregnancy, and despair cannot possibly focus on academic excellence. There is no curriculum brilliant enough to compensate for a hungry stomach or a distracted mind."

Unfortunately, many of the communities in Connecticut where children are not making adequate educational gains are the same communities where health disparities such as low birth weight, infant mortality, asthma and other chronic conditions are prevalent. According to the report, *How are Student Health Risks and Resilience Related to Academic Progress of Schools?* (WestEd 2004): "Policies and practices focusing exclusively on increasing test scores while ignoring the comprehensive health needs of students are almost certain to leave many children, and many schools, behind." Therefore, in our state's effort to close the growing achievement gap, bold new policies and strategies that center on the school's critical role in identifying and addressing the health and safety needs of all students must be incorporated into the plan.

How We Are Doing

The best single indicator of the health of young children is the percent of children who have a medical home, that is, who receive the majority of their care from a single provider. We do not yet have the ability to report this indicator, and it is the highest priority for the Health and Safety Data Development Agenda. The best proxy indicator that we can currently report is the percent of children uninsured.

Percent of uninsured children under age 18



What We Would Like to Measure

Percent of children with a medical home, that is, who receive the majority of their care from a single provider.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Implement comprehensive health care services within schools, including school-based health and dental centers where children are at-risk, staffed with adequate numbers of school health and mental health providers (i.e., school nurses, social workers, psychologists, and counselors) based on national recommendations for staffing ratios.
2. Develop a system for collecting and reporting student health data at the local school level. The system would be used by schools to track and address the health needs of children and would also allow critical data to be reported at the state level.

Shorter-Term Actions to Help Us Do Better

1. Collaborate with state agencies, schools, child advocacy groups and other stakeholders to implement the Coordinated School Health approach to address the health and safety needs of children, which includes ensuring that all schools provide access to school- and community-based health and mental health services and inform families about HUSKY.

2. Work with providers and schools to improve data collection and reporting of health information at the local and state level.

3. Family and Community Involvement

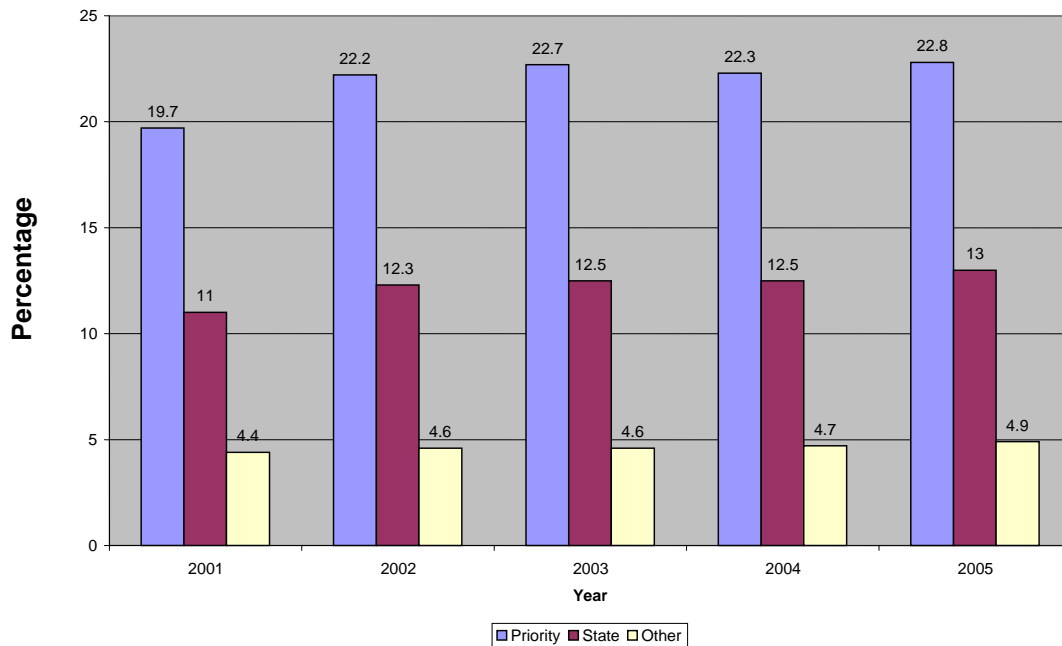
More than three decades of research have shown that family involvement improves student learning. This is true whether the child is in preschool or high school, whether the family is affluent or poor, and whether or not the parents finished high school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When families are involved, students are more likely to: earn higher grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programs; be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits; attend school regularly; have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education. *These effects are greatest for low-income children.*

It is a stark reality in Connecticut that some children are at risk for educational failure solely because of the circumstances in which they are growing up. Poverty, teen pregnancy, high school drop out rates, lack of parenting skills and resources, neighborhood crime and lack of community supports (such as family resource centers), transportation and child care are all barriers to families and communities providing the support that children need to succeed in school. If we are to work toward closing the achievement gap in Connecticut, we must provide families and communities with the resources they need to support children's achievement in school.

How We Are Doing

Research has shown that mothers' literacy level is one of the best predictors of the success of young children. We cannot yet report on the literacy level of the mothers of children in kindergarten through grade 3. We can report the percent of births to mothers who have not completed high school.

Births to Mothers w/o a HS Diploma



What Else We Would Like to Measure

Percent of children with a caring adult in their lives.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. A System of Parent/Guardian Education and Support: Create a year-round coordinated system of education and resources for parenting, parent/guardian leadership and adult education that provides parents/guardians with access to classes and courses offered in facilities throughout the state. Classes and resources may be housed in schools, in private businesses, public libraries and on-line. Programs should provide parents/guardians and community members with new or additional skills, knowledge and confidence to champion their children's education.

2. Prevention is far more effective than remediation. We must ensure that high school students stay in school and graduate. We must provide programs for teen mothers and their babies so that the mothers can complete their education and their babies get off to a good start.

Shorter-Term Actions to Help Us Do Better

1. Increase family literacy including mothers' education levels, knowledge of child development, and strategies for supporting learning at home. Partner with parents/guardians in designing strategies that build on the family's current use of literacy.

2. Provide a family literacy continuum, including preschool, out-of-school-time, e.g., after school and summer programs, adult learning, parent/guardian education and leadership.

4. Highly Effective Staff

To address the concerns in reading achievement mentioned previously, three school-level factors are essential:

- highly effective staff
- a positive school environment, and
- leadership.

The quality of teachers and support service professionals, as well as their racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, are critical components to be considered when seeking to improve student outcomes and close the achievement gap. Knowledge of the elementary content areas (reading/language arts, math, science and social studies) and culturally-sensitive pedagogy and methodology are all foundational components that a highly skilled teacher or support service professional must possess.

These skill sets are not the only components for successful classroom instruction, however. Teachers must also be able to:

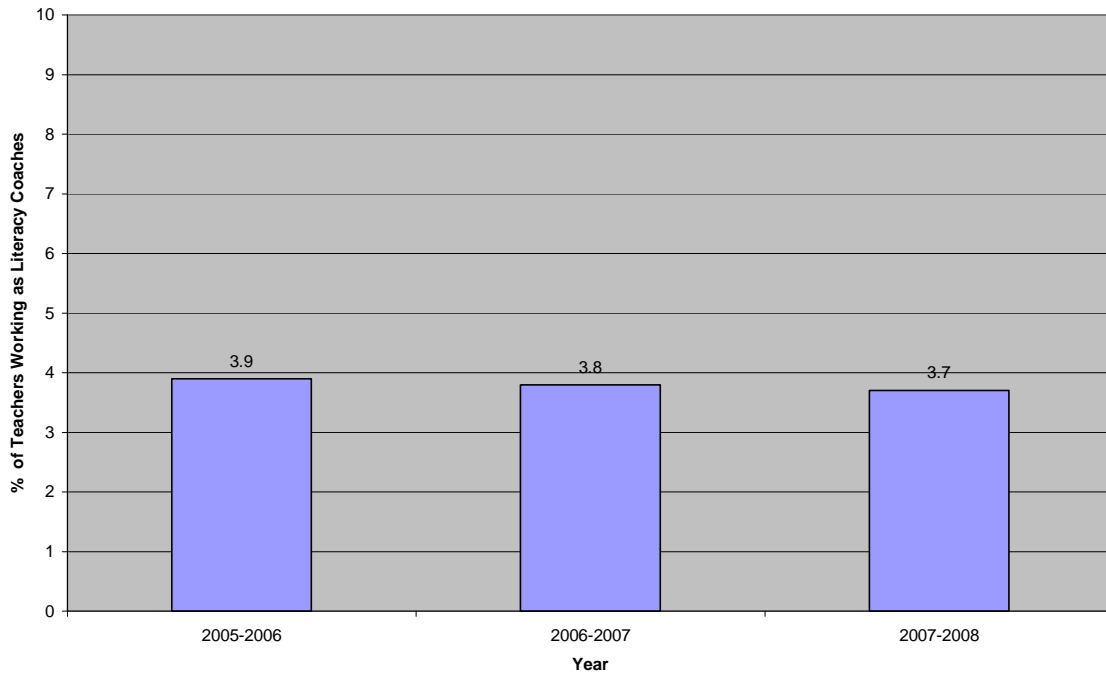
- develop a positive classroom climate that is conducive to learning for all students
- use differentiated teaching strategies for students with various learning styles and needs, and
- assess and determine areas in need of improvement for each individual child.

Continuous enhancement of educators' skills is required if we are to appropriately address the individual learning needs of all students, improve student outcomes, and begin to close the achievement gap.

How We Are Doing

The best single measure of whether staff is highly effective is the percent of teachers who employ written instructional plans for each student based on their individual performance on standardized tests, as well as on formative assessments. We cannot yet report this measure, and it is a priority for the Highly Effective Staff Data Development Agenda. The best proxy measure that we can report at this time is the percent of teachers who have an advanced certificate in reading and language arts and who are serving as coaches to their fellow teachers.

Literacy Coaches Assigned to K-3



What We Would Like to Measure

Percent of teachers using written instructional action plans for each student based on individual performance on standardized tests and formative assessments.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Create training/professional development requirements for paraprofessionals in evidence-based practices for raising student achievement.
2. Create a performance-based assessment system for the state to use in evaluating teacher preparation programs at higher education institutions that explicitly links the state's program approval to:
 - the performance of the graduates of each higher education institution on assessment of their mastery of evidence based teaching techniques;
 - the ability of program graduates to demonstrate longitudinal performance gains on state mastery tests for the students they teach; and
 - the qualifications and demonstrated competencies of higher education faculty in teacher preparation programs, with the requirement that all teacher preparation faculty demonstrate proficiency within three years on the state's new mastery test of evidence-based instruction techniques for raising student achievement.

Shorter-Term Actions to Help Us Do Better

1. Work with the State Board of Education and the State Board of Higher Education to ensure that higher education teacher preparation and curricula:
 - are aligned with evidence-based instructional practices that maximize student achievement gains and with the results of the new state reading certification test;

- prepare teacher candidates to partner with parents/guardians in designing strategies that build on the family's current use of literacy; and
- promote a positive and welcoming school environment.

2. Reconvene the Early Reading Success Panel to develop an implementation plan to reverse the state's declining trend in reading performance.

5. Connected Students, Welcoming Schools

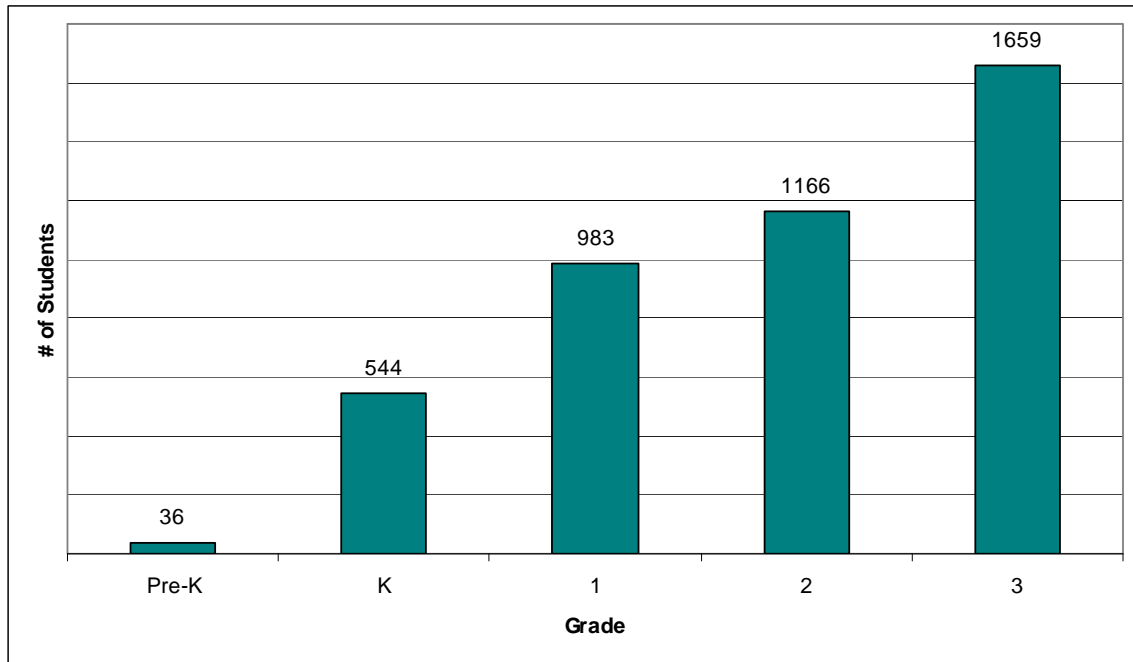
Young children must be connected to and engaged in their initial years of schooling as a precondition for any level of academic and social success. The climate in which they go to school determines their level of attention and participation. Children who are not physically or emotionally present cannot learn. When children perceive they are part of the school and feel physically, emotionally and intellectually safe, they are happy to be there. When they feel they are treated fairly by adults in school and feel that the adults care about them, they are ready to learn. A positive climate is an indispensable precondition for realizing high achievement and social success.

When children are disengaged, their physical and emotional attendance is sacrificed. They must be in school to learn; it is thus of fundamental importance to ensure their physical as well as their emotional attendance. In addition, a welcoming school atmosphere has a direct impact on parent involvement. Creating a positive, welcoming and engaging school climate does not alone guarantee student success. However, no matter what else is happening in the school to support student achievement, negative and toxic school climates will, at the very least, undermine and diminish academic and social success and, at the worst, cause student failure.

How We Are Doing

At this time, we are unable to present data on any meaningful measures of school climate. The best single measure is the percent of children who report that they have a caring adult in their school. We cannot yet report that measure and it is a priority for the Data Development Agenda for Connected Students, Welcoming Schools. The next best measure would be the number of days absent per student. We can begin reporting that measure in October 2008. The best proxy measure that we can currently report is the number of children suspended or expelled in 2006.

Students Suspended or Expelled in 2006



What We Would Like to Measure

Percent of students who identify a caring adult in their school.

Key Policy Recommendation

1. Require SDE to adopt a statewide common survey of students, staff, and parents/guardians to assess school climate.

- SDE should publish a list of research-supported models of positive school climate and annually revise the list with promising practices from Connecticut schools.
- SDE will provide increased technical assistance to schools where key measures are not meeting acceptable standards as established by SDE.

Require all school districts to:

- Administer the state survey and report the results to SDE.
- Adopt a model and annually report on key measures.

Shorter-Term Actions to Help Us Do Better

1. Assist schools to improve school climate:

- collect all relevant data, such as attendance of students and staff, visits to the nurse, disciplinary action;
- administer school climate/environment surveys at the school level to students, family members, and faculty/staff members;
- identify areas in need of improvement; and
- integrate school climate recommendations and action steps into their required school improvement plans.

2. Assist schools to create a welcoming climate that encourages family involvement and ensures that parents/guardians are partners in their children’s learning.

6. Leadership in Creating a Professional Learning Community

Strong leadership emerges as the most fundamental common element in the increasingly extensive research on what it takes to create schools where adults work together collaboratively to ensure that all children learn. This critical component of Connecticut’s early childhood strategy leads us to recognize certain essential attributes that our children need in their school leaders:

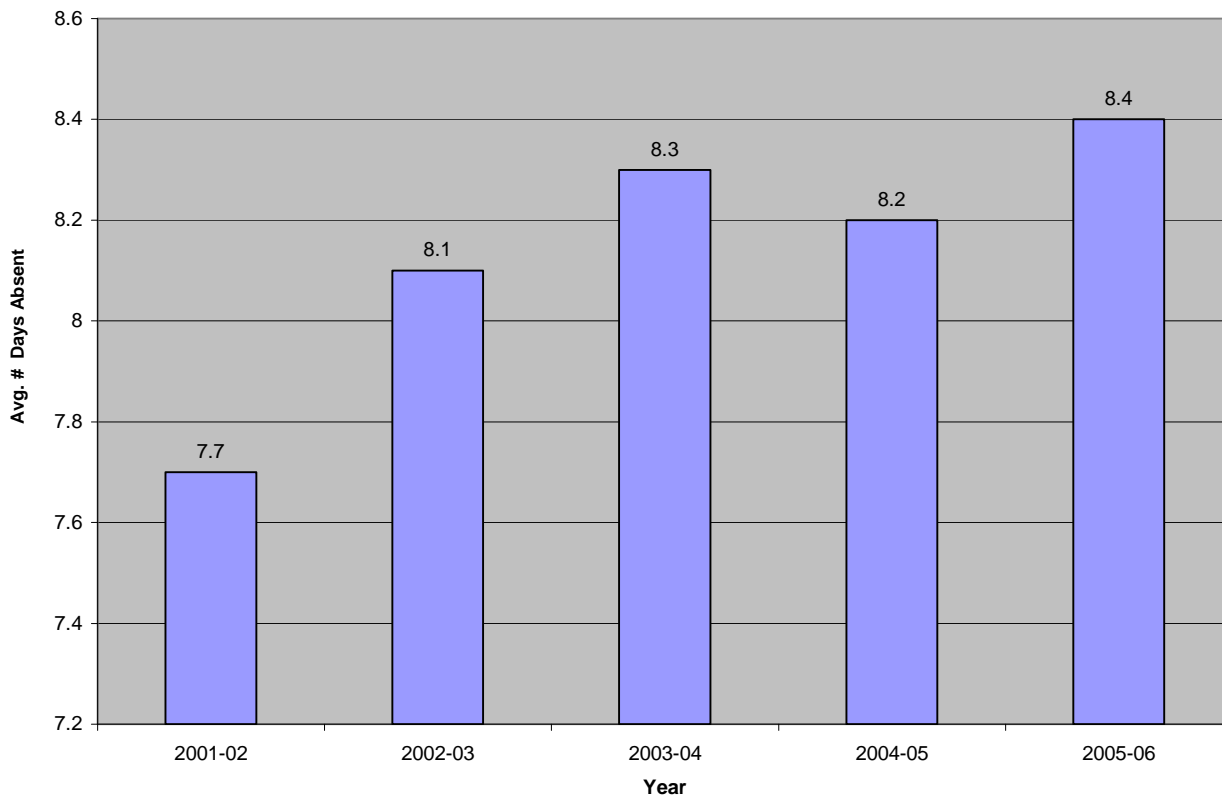
- entrepreneurial visionaries with a commitment to transforming the system in which they operate into a community that delivers results for all children;
- knowledgeable instructional leaders, conversant in the growing body of evidence-based instructional practices for raising student achievement; and
- gifted coaches and facilitators with the interpersonal skills to foster an atmosphere of collaboration and trust in which all staff members are continuously developing their professional skills.

For Connecticut’s existing and emergent school principals to realize their potential as transformative leaders along these lines, they will need a framework of state and district policy that fully supports this vision by fostering both autonomy and accountability—giving school leaders the scope to exercise their talents and the requirement to deliver results. We also need new ways of recruiting, training, and certifying an ethnically and linguistically diverse pool of the most talented new leaders for our schools while at the same time providing the best re-training professional development for existing administrators. We have powerful examples in Connecticut of schools making significant improvement in the achievement of the poorest children. We need to take advantage of what is documented to work under the most adverse conditions and empower a new generation of leaders to transform our schools into communities where all the professionals learn and grow together so that their students can be successful.

How We Are Doing

The best single measure of leadership in creating a professional learning community is whether principals have the autonomy they need in a variety of areas that have been proven to enhance student performance, including hiring and assignment of staff and control over resources. We cannot yet report this measure, and it is a priority for the Data Development Agenda for Leadership in Creating a Professional Learning Community. The best proxy measure we can currently report is the average number of days absent per teacher. Leadership creates empowered, engaged teachers who are rarely absent.

Statewide Teacher Attendance



What We Would Like to Measure

Percent of principals who report having sufficient autonomy to implement the promising and proven practices that have been shown to close gaps between socio-economic groups and dramatically raise achievement levels for all students.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Partner with independent providers to create school leadership institutes focused on evidence-based instruction that will: train new school leaders; assess the knowledge of existing school leaders; and provide professional development for all school leaders.
2. Create new routes for principal certification that facilitate the recruitment and hiring of highly talented and motivated professionals who have entrepreneurial vision, understand evidenced-based instructional practices, and are gifted coaches and facilitators.

Shorter-Term Actions to Help Us Do Better

1. SDE to work with districts to create professional learning environments:
 - develop model curricula that include procedures for regular progress monitoring using formative assessments and individualized learning plans for each child as detailed in the "Accountability Plan" (under Section 32 of Public Act 07-3);
 - train and support all teachers/schools in the voluntary use of these models; and
 - mandate the use of these models for districts "in need of corrective action."

2. Work with the State Board of Education and the Board of Governors of Higher Education to ensure that higher education administrator training and curricula are aligned with evidence-based instructional practices that maximize student achievement gains.