

**Fine by Nine:
All children healthy, safe and successful in school by Age 9**

**Goal 2 Committee Report to the
Early Childhood Education Cabinet:**

Six Areas of Strategic Focus

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Highlights

The Goal 2 Committee 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 preceding sentence summarizes the work of six subgroups of committee 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, Engaging Schools; and Leadership in Creating a Professional Learning Environment. 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

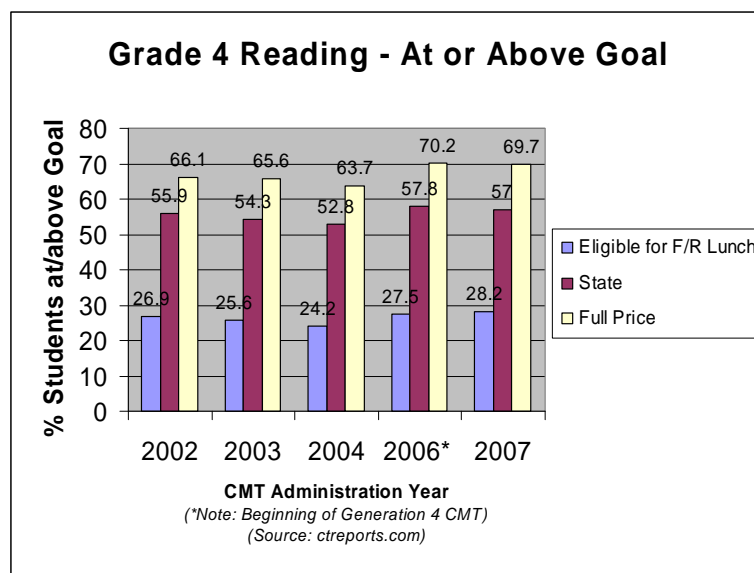
Percent of teachers whose students make significant gains in reading.

Key Policy Recommendation

Implement a comprehensive test of content knowledge and pedagogy in the science of reading for all new elementary school teachers as a condition of certification.

What Else It Will Take to Do Better

Implement and enforce the statewide education accountability plan, which includes quality reviews of schools and the use of corrective action plans for those schools in need of improvement, to ensure that all schools are teaching all students to read.



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 weights, 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.

What We Would Like to Measure

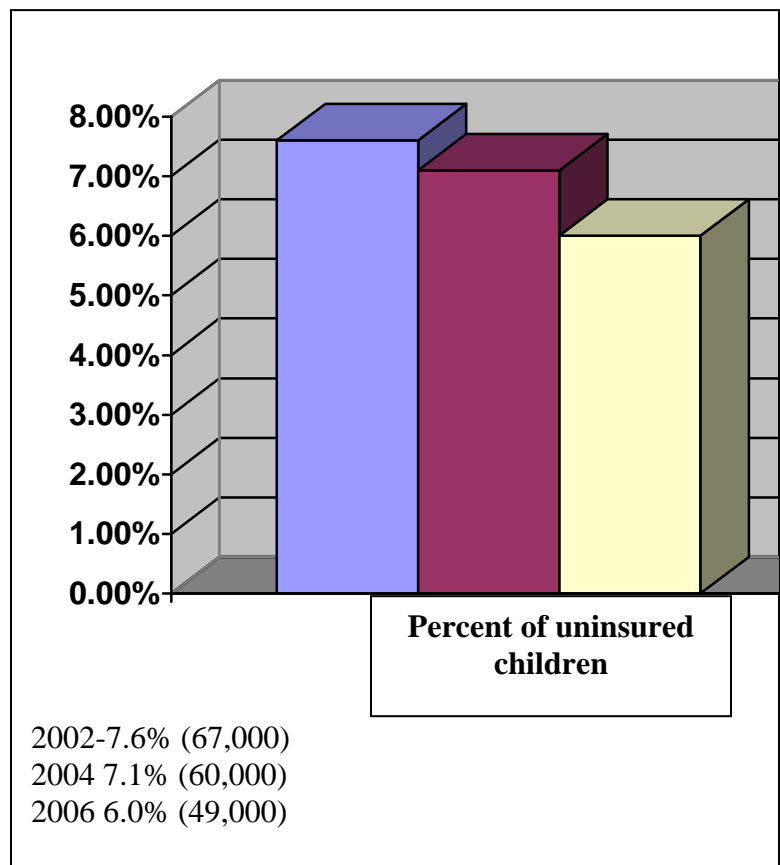
Percent of children with a medical home, that is, who receive the majority of their care from a single provider.

Key Policy Recommendation

Implement comprehensive health care services within schools that include school-based health and dental centers to serve children who are at-risk; and ensure adequate numbers of school health and mental health providers (e.g., school nurses, social workers, psychologists, and counselors) based on national recommendations for staffing ratios.

What Else It Will Take to Do Better

Require all school districts to address the physical, social, and emotional needs of students by implementing the Coordinated School Health approach and incorporating the policy recommendations and



requirements identified in the State Department of Education's *Guidelines for a Coordinated Approach to School Health and Action guide for School nutrition and Physical Activities Policies*.

3. Family and Community Involvement

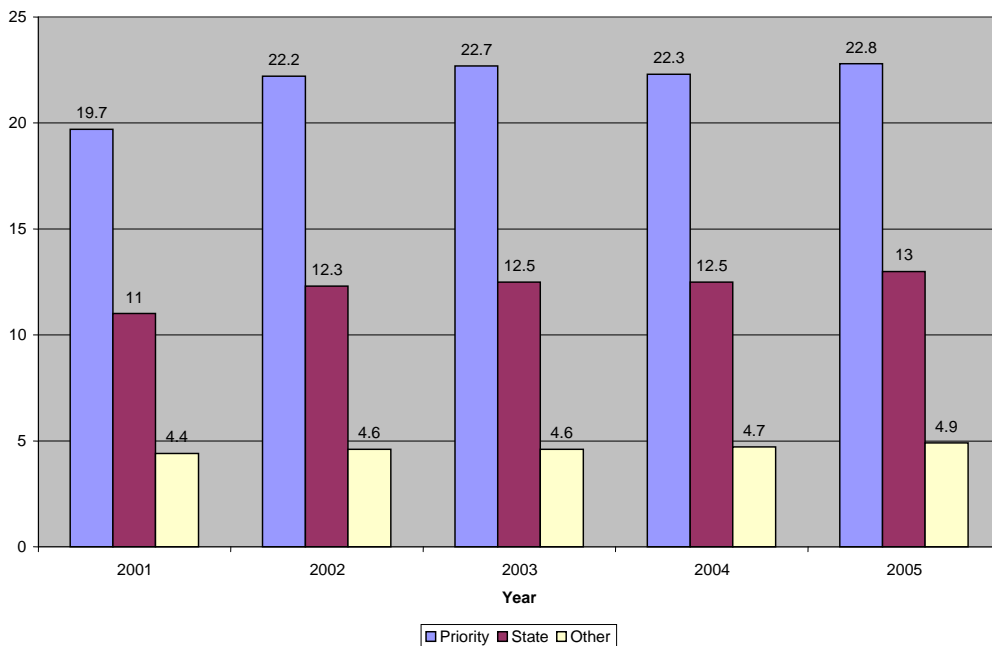
More than three decades of research have shown that family involvement improves student learning. This is true whether the child is in preschool or high school, whether the family is affluent or poor, and whether or not the parents finished high school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When families are involved, 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 Three. 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 Recommendation

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.

What Else It Will Take to Do Better

Increase family literacy, including mothers' education levels, knowledge of child development, and strategies for supporting learning at home.

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), culturally-sensitive pedagogy and methodology are all foundational components that a highly skilled teacher or support service professional must possess.

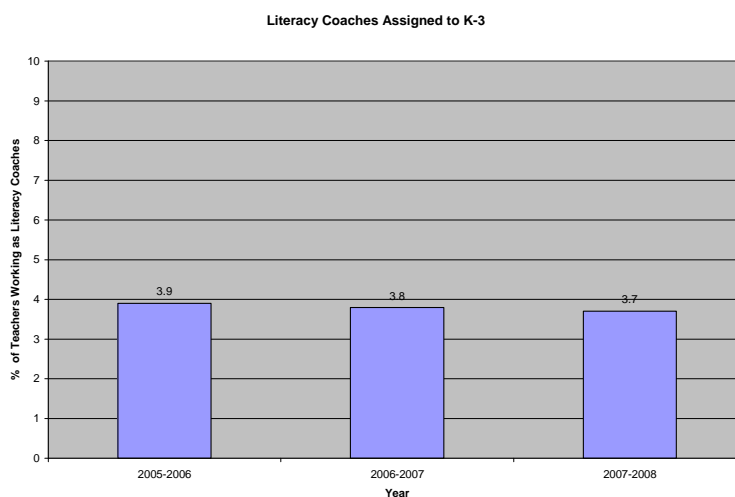
These skill sets are not the only components, however. Teachers must also be able to:

- 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.

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 Recommendation

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 following outcomes:

- The mastery of evidence-based teaching techniques by pre-service graduates of each higher education institution
- The ability of program graduates to demonstrate longitudinal performance gains on state mastery tests for the students they teach
- 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, including the achievement of ethnically and linguistically diverse learners.

What Else It Will Take to Do Better

Ensure that evidence-based practices for raising student achievement are fully incorporated into teacher training programs and ongoing professional development. This requires establishing a framework of performance-based accountability for teachers and teacher training institutions that is validated by longitudinal student performance gains disaggregated by teacher and by training institution.

5. Connected Students, Engaging 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.

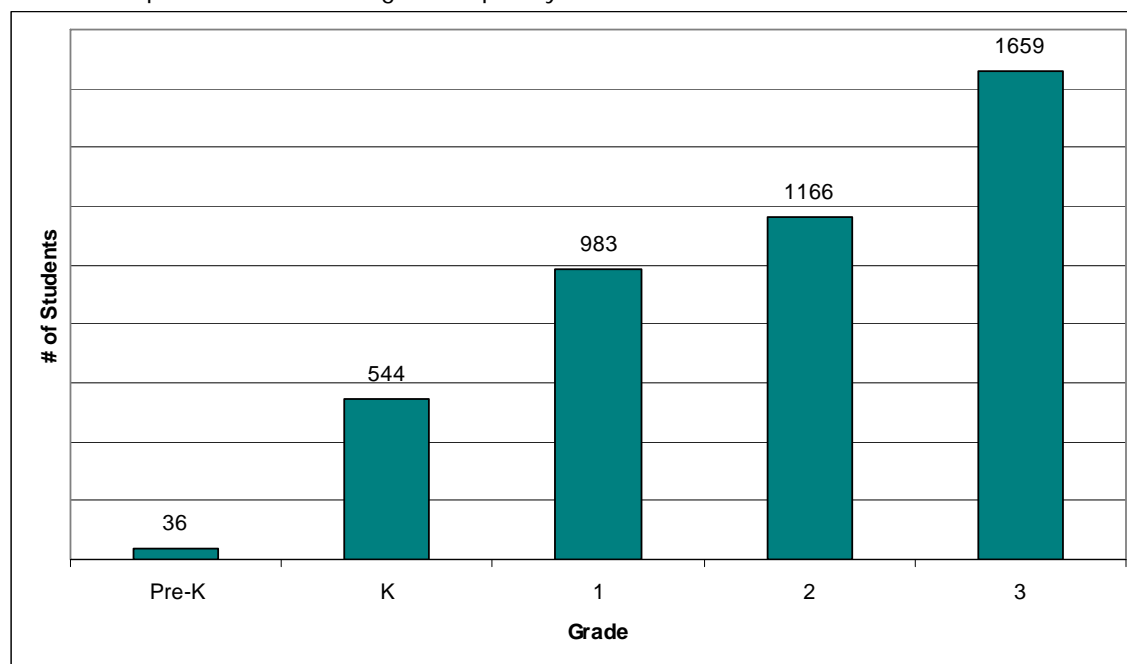
When children are disengaged, their physical and emotional attendance is sacrificed. They must be in school to learn; it is thus of fundamental importance to ensure their physical as well as their emotional attendance. Creating a positive, welcoming and engaging school climate does not alone guarantee 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, Engaging Schools. The best proxy measure that we currently report is the number of children committing a disciplinary offense in 2006.

Students Reported as Committing a Disciplinary Offense



What We Would Like to Measure

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

Key Policy Recommendation

Require all school districts to administer and report to SDE the results of school climate survey data, including:

- a. Schools reviewing their results and developing an action plan informed by the data
- b. Schools reviewing, revising, and implementing their positive school climate plans, including the chosen evidenced-based models

What Else It Will Take to Do Better

Require all schools to adopt evidence-based models of positive school climate.

6. Leadership in Creating a Professional Learning Environment

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
- 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.

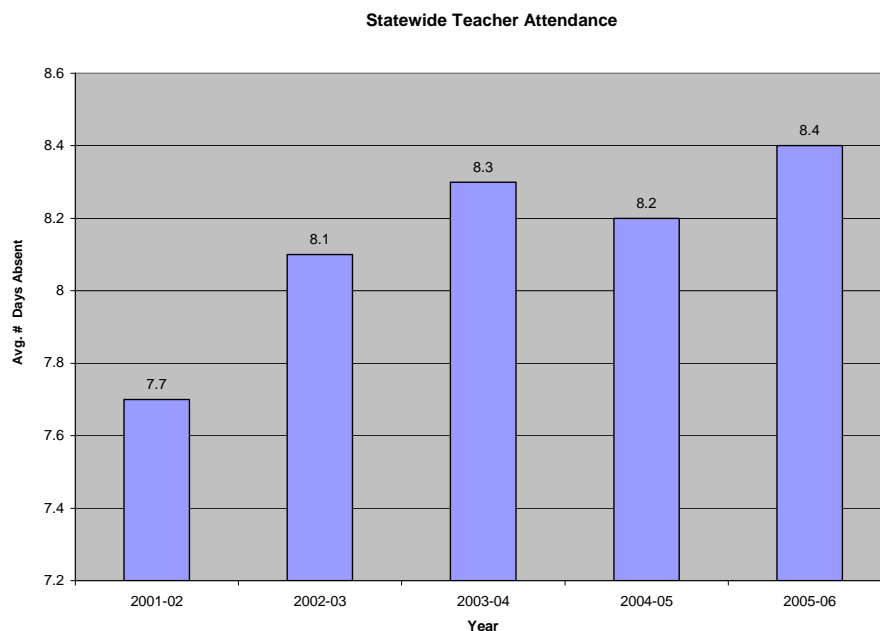
How We Are Doing

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 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.

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 Recommendation



Create an alternate route for principal and superintendent certification (ARC) that functions in conjunction with a new School Leadership Institute to facilitate the recruitment and training of highly talented, diverse, and motivated professionals from a variety of fields. For principal ARC candidates, establish admission criteria of career experience including at least two years of classroom teaching. Establish ARC graduation requirements for both principals and superintendents to include demonstrating mastery-level knowledge on an assessment of evidence based instruction techniques for all students.

What Else It Will Take to Do Better

Revamp recruitment, training and certification of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse principal candidates; ensure that all new and existing elementary school leaders can effectively oversee the implementation of evidence based instruction techniques and that they create professional learning communities for raising student achievement in every classroom under their supervision.