

**SERIES: 2003-2004**

**CIRCULAR LETTER: C-4**

**TO:** Superintendents of Schools

**FROM:** Theodore S. Sergi, Commissioner of Education

**SUBJECT:** Back-to-School Message

**DATE:** August 19, 2003

***Connecticut's Public Schools:  
Working with Families for the Early Success of Each Student***

This is my 10th and last back-to-school message, and I have spent time re-reading its predecessors. The themes of the past are still relevant:

- focusing on continuous improvements in student achievements;
- the more we expect, the more students achieve;
- working together — we all have a role;
- reducing student isolation;
- early reading success;
- there is no one solution to the teacher/administrator shortages;
- character and responsibility matter, and connecting with every student is critical;
- the need for international education; and
- relentlessly attacking our achievement gaps.

In fact, there is a common thread of “Greater Expectations” through all of these messages. **Raising our expectations for students, teachers, our schools, our government and our communities and acting on those expectations is the key to progress.**

In my more than three decades in public education in Connecticut, I have much to reflect on. Clearly, the quest for equality of opportunity as represented by the *Horton v. Meskill* and *Sheff v. O'Neill* cases has had the most profound effect on my career and on the state as a whole. Connecticut responded to the equality imperative by trying to equalize all state resources that flow to local communities; establishing standards, assessments and reports on the condition of education; improving teacher salaries and standards; reducing student isolation; adding time and technology; focusing on early reading; and supporting preschool.

Certainly the challenges of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) will have a major influence on the next decade. I hope we in Connecticut will find the silver lining in this law, and see the opportunities that it presents for helping more students. The only thing we should fear is the paralysis of the status quo and our own pride.

There are two issues that I am convinced need much more attention from all of us and from our elected leaders: **early school success — particularly universal access to preschool — and the role of parents and family as a child’s first and most important teachers.**

## **Preschool**

Yes, we have made good progress in providing preschool in Connecticut to our neediest 3- and 4-year-olds, but we are only one-third to one-half the way to the goal of universal access, based on family and community ability to pay. The State Board of Education has adopted a goal of reaching universal access in the next 10 years. Connecticut’s state-funded preschool and federally funded Head Start must continue to work together, focusing on a quality program with health and other services and parent training. The statewide need for facilities and well-trained staff members will continue to limit our ability to reach the goal, but Connecticut’s model of multiple providers, multiple funding sources, local readiness councils and an accreditation requirement has proven successful.

When you add to quality, universal preschool the opportunities for birth-to-three experiences, full-day kindergarten, family resource centers at elementary schools and the relentless pursuit of every child being a confident reader by age 6, the probability of early and lasting success in school is dramatically increased. All the scientific evidence of brain development and human growth tell us that dollars invested early pay huge dividends and reduce the possibility of the costs of early grade retention, special education, drug and alcohol abuse, prison, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, etc.

The real point here is that we cannot afford not to make annual progress toward universal preschool and early school success. These goals are educationally, morally and economically sound public policy.

## **Parents and Families**

For years we have heard the words that parents and families are every child’s first teacher. Unfortunately, our actions have never matched that belief. Schools have generally left parents and families out of the teaching and learning process.

When we consider the family’s early influences, the daily opportunities, and the total hours of contact, schools must find more regular ways to engage parents and other family members in specific student learning that matches the curriculum. Family reinforcement of school learning is essential; without it, we are not developing our youth to their full potential.

Regular (weekly) communication and contact between school and family — by phone, e-mail, meeting, classroom visit, etc. — is critical. Young people need to know that their parents and teachers know each other and talk regularly about their progress and needs. Perhaps it is time to consider expanding adult education programs in communities to include school/family engagement around student learning and well-being. Schools should not and will not replace families, but they can become better partners.

I think we have underestimated the family’s capacity to assist in teaching and learning, and we in schools have been shortsighted about believing that student learning is our job alone. We must raise our expectations about the ability of every family, regardless of educational level or socioeconomic status, to help. Every adult and older sibling in a family has something to offer a child — our job is to identify specific tasks and materials for families to use. The more we expect from families, the more they will contribute, and the more students will achieve. Please don’t forget that achievement includes good character and personal responsibility. Family life presents many real, daily opportunities to understand and fulfill one’s duty to others.

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Let me take this opportunity to thank you for the privilege of serving as Connecticut’s Commissioner of Education. I have loved working with Connecticut’s schools, educators, students and families, and I believe students today are better off because of everyone’s collective efforts. I leave this position with conflicting emotions: a strong sense of accomplishment and satisfaction matched by an impatient awareness of all that remains to be done.

The fight for greater equality of education will always continue, but today’s young people are more capable than we were at their age, and the future is brighter than we think.

# NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: CHALLENGE, CHANGE, REWARDS

Theodore S. Sergi  
Commissioner of Education

The implementation of the new federal law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) brings all Connecticut educators face-to-face with their reasons for becoming a teacher. While the debate and tension will continue over the issue of federal vs. state and local rights to prescribe education policy and practice, the families and children of our state are anxious for us to improve our system of public education, and the prosperity of our future depends on it.

The NCLB Act requires each state to identify schools and districts “in need of improvement” every year — based on making “adequate yearly progress” on state exams toward the goal of 100 percent of students scoring at the proficient level on the state tests by 2013-14. Schools and districts are evaluated by the overall achievement of their students, as well as the achievement of the subgroups of poor and minority students, students with disabilities and English language learners.

The initial implementation of NCLB could yield as many as 25 percent (or 250) of Connecticut schools “in need of improvement” for 2004-05; as many as one-half of our school districts and the state as a whole “in need of improvement;” and an increasing number of schools and districts each year.

If we are willing to accept the past as a predictor of the future, then labeling schools and districts as “in need of improvement” should result in three things:

- they will reexamine and improve their curriculum and teaching;
- we will reallocate and add resources to these schools with the greatest needs; and
- most important, statewide more students will achieve at a higher level.

## *We All Need Improvement*

Every student, every teacher, every school, every district **and each of us is “in need of improvement,”** and that should be the spirit with which we embrace the term and acknowledge our greatest needs in public education. We know we have not been as successful as we can be with every student, and particularly our students from families below the poverty level, families whose home language is other than English and students who are black and Hispanic.

Connecticut’s schools have a right to expect support and understanding from our citizens and the media as we go through this process. Publicly identifying schools as “in need of improvement” leaves educators, students and parents vulnerable to the label of “failing.” This term is both

unfair and inaccurate, and it will not motivate schools to improve. Schools will embrace change more if they have the support of community and business leaders, parents and families.

The term “failure” should be reserved for those who accept failure and the status quo; for those who declare victory — when there is none; for those who do not expect all students to achieve; and for those who say we can only improve with more resources. Of course, I believe we need more federal, state, local and private resources to help our public schools reach every child. But, to demand more resources without simultaneously admitting the need to change and the need to reallocate resources is not responsible.

### **‘Needing Improvement’ is an Opportunity**

The designation of “in need of improvement” must be seen as an opportunity to improve and to receive additional help and resources. In Connecticut, since 1984 it has been understood that to be labeled a “priority school district” reflects true and relative need and results in added state funds targeted at student achievement.

Every school and district we have identified as a “priority” or “needing improvement” or the “lowest achieving” has also been one with a high poverty rate. These are clearly those with the toughest job. No one can deny the stark differences between the two Connecticut — one very privileged and the other very, very poor. Neither can anyone deny that there are some schools with high poverty which break the mold and have their students achieving at high levels. These “vanguard” schools have high expectations and act on those expectations. Implementing NCLB should help export this success to many other schools.

### **Change is Critical**

We must not accept low educational achievement for any number of years — without consequences. The word “consequences” to me means **we owe it to the children in these schools to change a structure of instruction that is not working.** We must implement changes driven by what each student needs to achieve the essential skills for further success.

There are provisions of NCLB that should be changed, and I am optimistic that the Congress and the President will see the wisdom of such changes. At the same time, as we get more accustomed to being “in need of improvement,” many of us will continue to advocate for more resources, for greater expectations, for improved instruction, for continuous improvement in all student achievements — including good character and personal responsibility — and for closing Connecticut’s achievement gaps.

Every school in Connecticut can do better. They will — if we expect them to, if we help them to change, and if we act first in the interests of the students.

## WHAT WORKS TO HELP STUDENTS

Closing Connecticut's achievement gaps requires a strong commitment to high expectations and specific, student-oriented actions. We know what works to improve student achievement — we know how to help every student succeed:

- provide universal preschool and full-day kindergarten;
- ensure that every first grader becomes a confident reader;
- provide world language instruction starting in kindergarten/first grade;
- teach good character and personal responsibility;
- teach the basic concepts of algebra and geometry beginning in the third grade;
- provide one-on-one tutoring and mentoring;
- use a more hands-on, active and personal approach in middle school;
- in high school, provide more academic rigor, college credit, independent study, community service, and transitions to higher education and work;
- keep school buildings open year-round, and make more time for learning;
- ensure more and better use of technology;
- reduce student isolation and integrate global studies;
- develop staff training and school improvement plans that focus on student achievements and are guided by results; and
- offer more choice of schools and programs, and engage parents/families, volunteers and others in student learning.