



# Ellington Public Schools

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May 31, 2022

Dear Honorable Members of the Connecticut General Assembly:

The Ellington Board of Education is writing to express its concerns about Public Act 22-80 An Act Concerning Mental and Physical Health Services in Schools (formerly Senate Bill 1), specifically the process by which last minute additions that negatively affect children—and were not vetted with a broad group of stakeholders—made its way into the final bill. Ironically, these two last-minute provisions that are meant for adults are a detriment to the students whom this important bill increasing mental health support is supposed to benefit.

This process is emblematic of the issue with the way this legislature has worked. Instead of transparency and collaboration, decisions were often made behind the scenes with little input, leaving key stakeholders to adapt to the consequences of policy made by politics, not practice.

While some of these decisions made in response to persistent lobbying are more innocuous than others, you do not have to look hard to recognize that the last minute language within the Act has clear issues that will negatively impact children.

Language inserted to ensure teachers are provided with a minimum of 30 minutes of duty-free lunch may have merit, but the last minute addition and immediate effective date ignores a host of side effects that it creates. Ellington is one of the approximately 40% of school districts that will be negatively impacted by this provision, with some of our [concerns](#) outlined by the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS).

For us, it equates to an expansion of 5-6 additional minutes of lunch time per wave at our high and middle schools. A schedule is a balancing act of all the priorities a district must weigh: instructional, operational, contractual. This bill tips that balance and ultimately has a negative impact by:

- Reducing instructional time in Ellington by up to 18 minutes per day, approximately equivalent to **9.5 days** for the school year;
- Usurping the existing collective bargaining process whereby unions and districts come together to understand each other's needs;
- Ignoring costly alternatives to maintain instructional time (e.g.: lengthening the school day), which could run Ellington over \$1.25 million;
- Throwing a last minute wrench in a schedule that was already completed and communicated to families;
- Wasting both time and resources to redo and change schedules for 2022-2023 in a short timeframe.

Recently the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) [responded](#) to the good-faith concerns raised by CAPSS with “terror” that there would be such objection to the 30-minute lunch. We have found our amazing teachers in Ellington to be eminently professional and reasonable when problem solving on topics such as these, including through monthly meetings and the standard negotiations process completed as recently as last year.

However, we find it terrifying that an education lobby can ignore the last-minute nature and the upheaval and detriment to students this requirement pushes onto districts. This provision has put a thumb on the scale, upsetting what was a carefully balanced equilibrium. No one is claiming it's "rocket science" to recreate a schedule, but it is time, money, and resources wasted on an effort that is a detriment to students.

In PA 22-80, there is an additional issue of prohibiting "dual instruction," which has significant impacts on our students and their well-being. Prior to the past three school years, there have been elements of remote learning in schools that have grown in capability over time.

- Supporting students who are sick and in the hospital by allowing them access learning experiences within their school
- Building unique learning opportunities for students from middle school to take high school classes remotely
- Developing partnerships with surrounding communities to provide personalized learning by accessing different coursework (e.g., world languages).
- Expanding opportunities for students expelled from school beyond the minimum tutoring requirements

The CEA argument ignores the positive effects for students. Their dismissal shows how they are out of step with the progress made by educators and the additional needs of students during the last three school years. The expansion of our remote learning technology and the fluencies of our educators during the past three school years allowed the Ellington Public Schools to think creatively and take a regional lead in providing support for students in Ellington and our surrounding communities struggling with emotional and behavioral needs.

This year, we launched a regional program for Behavioral, Academic, and Social & Emotional Support (BASES). Our BASES program supports K-12 students who are having issues in a traditional educational setting:

- Experience emotional distress in dealing with social interactions
- Have diagnosable behavioral conditions addressed by an individualized education plan
- Have anxiety about learning in larger groups
- Are dealing with traumas associated with difficult family experiences

The key is that these special students receive access to small group instruction, counseling and social work services, and most importantly, have the ability to participate, with supervision, in their classes from a satellite location. While the CEA pushes us to get creative, their provision actually limits creative efforts already underway. The CEA wants us to "ask a teacher," but they did not ask our students and their families when they lobbied to get this in at the last-minute.

Our district is not blind to the challenge that hybrid (dual instruction) learning puts on teaching staff, nor its challenges for students. We work locally with the union to understand their concerns and provide a program that meets the needs of students without overly burdening teachers. Public Act 22-80 usurps these local decisions in favor of broad mandates that eliminate rationality, creativity, and compromise.

We ask that you consider the impacts of this last-minute process, lacking in both transparency, and judgment. Advocacy by one lobby does not equate to an open and transparent process; there was no broad input or public debate on these topics. That is not the responsibility of the CEA, but of the legislative leadership that instead chose to add this in an 11<sup>th</sup> hour amendment. Bad process often leads to bad policy that ultimately does not work to improve outcomes for children.

We request that you redress these issues in a future session, possibly this summer in a special session to be called by the Governor. This time we encourage a process that is open, transparent and with input from all interested parties. Our hope is that the problematic elements of the bill can be rescinded.

We will be inviting our area legislative representatives to an Ellington Board of Education committee meeting in the near future to discuss these issues. Please feel free to contact our Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Scott Nicol [snicol@ellingtonschools.net](mailto:snicol@ellingtonschools.net), with any questions.

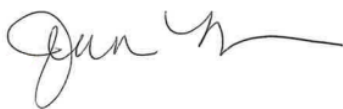
Sincerely,



Jennifer Dzen, Board Chair



Dr. Michael Young, Board Vice Chair



Jennifer Mullin, Board Secretary



Marcia Kupferschmid, Board Member



Angela Moser, Board Member



Kerry Socha, Board Member



Steve Viens, Board Member

Cc: Hon. N. Lamont, State of Connecticut  
C. Russell-Tucker, Commissioner CSDE  
F. Rabinowitz, CAPSS Executive Director  
K. Dias, President CEA  
J. Hochadel, President AFT Connecticut  
Connecticut Superintendents of Schools