

OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH
PUBLIC ACT SUMMARY



PA 26-149—sSB 220

Education Committee

Appropriations Committee

AN ACT CONCERNING STUDENT LITERACY, ASPIRING EDUCATORS, AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE AS PART OF THE WORLD LANGUAGES CURRICULUM AND THE PARAEDUCATOR HEALTH BENEFIT PLAN SUBSIDY PROGRAM

SUMMARY: This act makes the following unrelated changes to education laws:

1. requires the State Department of Education (SDE) to create guidance for school districts on implementing targeted reading intervention to students identified as struggling in reading (§ 1);
2. modifies the aspiring educators diversity scholarship program by (a) making “aspiring educators,” rather than “diverse educators,” eligible for the scholarship and (b) no longer requiring that candidates graduate from an alliance district high school (§§ 2 & 3);
3. requires SDE to establish the American Sign Language (ASL) education working group (§§ 4 & 5); and
4. makes permanent two health care subsidy programs for paraeducators employed by local or regional boards of education and expands the programs to include paraeducators at charter schools, allows a portion of unspent funds from the aspiring educators scholarship program to be used to help pay for the program expansion for charter schools, and requires the comptroller to calculate the cost of expanding the program to include charter school paraeducators (§§ 2, 6 & 7).

The act also makes several minor and technical changes.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026, except that the (1) codification of the assessment requirement and aspiring educator provisions are effective upon passage and (2) creation of the American Sign Language working group is effective January 1, 2027.

§ 1 — READING INTERVENTION AND ASSESSMENTS

The act requires SDE to create guidance on implementing multitiered systems of support (MTSS) or response to intervention (RTI) frameworks for students identified as struggling in reading and distribute it to local and regional boards of education (school boards). Generally, MTSS and RTI are educational approaches that identify struggling students and offer them targeted, personalized instruction to meet their needs, with services that increase in intensity (for example, in frequency or duration) as student need rises. The act requires the guidance to be based on the results of SDE-approved reading assessments.

By January 1, 2028, SDE must submit to the Education Committee a report on

the guidance it creates and any legislative recommendations.

§§ 2 & 3 — ASPIRING EDUCATOR SCHOLARSHIP

The act makes “aspiring educators,” rather than “diverse educators,” eligible for existing law’s teacher recruitment scholarship, which potentially broadens the pool of eligible candidates. It also changes the name from the “aspiring educators diversity scholarship program” to the “aspiring educators scholarship program.”

Under prior law, the scholarship targeted “diverse” students, which are those whose race is other than white, or whose ethnicity is defined as Hispanic or Latino by the federal Office of Management and Budget for use by the U.S. Census Bureau. Under the act, an “aspiring educator” is someone from a population subgroup that (a) is underrepresented in the teaching profession in Connecticut and (b) has been identified under state law as a teacher shortage area.

Under prior law, the SDE commissioner annually determines geographic and subject areas with teacher shortages based on teacher vacancies, new certificates issued, and classes being taught by people without training specific to the subject area. Under the act, the commissioner must also determine the population subgroups in which a teacher shortage exists and, when doing so, consider those that are underrepresented in teaching in the state based on data in the statewide public school information system (see BACKGROUND).

This potentially broadens eligibility for the scholarship and shortage designation. Although the act does not define “subgroup,” presumably, subgroup categories could include things in addition to race and ethnicity, such as gender, socio-economic status, disability, or other similar status.

Scholarship Program

Under prior law, the scholarship program awarded annual scholarships of up to \$10,000 to students who graduated from high school in an alliance district (see BACKGROUND) and are enrolled in good standing in a teacher preparation program at any four-year institution of higher education. The act eliminates the requirement that students graduate from an alliance district and replaces it with any school district in the state, which broadens eligibility.

The act requires SDE, in consultation with the Education Committee chairpersons, to develop a policy for administering the scholarship with the new criteria by January 1, 2027. SDE must annually award scholarships under the new criteria beginning FY 27 and, beginning January 1, 2028, annually submit a report to the Education Committee with data on the scholarship recipients’ population subgroups and the teacher preparation programs in which they are enrolled.

§§ 4 & 5 — AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE WORKING GROUP

The act requires SDE to establish an ASL education working group with at least eight members to make recommendations to SDE on (1) curriculum guidance for ASL instruction, (2) teacher certification standards based on standards set by the

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ASL Teachers Association and the ASL Proficiency Interview, and (3) guidance to educator preparation programs in the state for (a) expanding ASL and interpretation education programs and (b) incentives to become an ASL educator. (PA 26-151 also establishes an ASL education working group.)

The working group must have a representative from (1) SDE, (2) the Department of Aging and Disability Services, (3) the Department of Labor, (4) the Office of Higher Education, (5) the Connecticut Council of Language Teachers, (6) the American School for the Deaf, and (7) the Connecticut Association of the Deaf. It must also include at least one ASL instructor who teaches in a public school in the state.

Starting by January 1, 2028, SDE must annually report to the Education Committee on the working group's progress.

By July 1, 2030, SDE must issue the ASL instruction curriculum guidance described in the act to each local and regional board of education to ensure consistent implementation of ASL as part of the world languages curriculum required under state law. By law, world languages include ASL if it is taught by a qualified instructor who is supervised by a certified teacher.

Working Group Duties

The act requires the working group's recommendations to address:

1. ASL instruction curriculum guidance that includes aligning the curriculum with nationally recognized proficiency frameworks;
2. teacher certification standards based on standards set by the ASL Teachers Association and the ASL Proficiency Interview, including (a) establishing a proficiency benchmark, (b) recognizing an alternative certification pathway for native ASL users and interpreters, and (c) reciprocity with ASL teaching certifications from other states; and
3. guidance for educator preparation programs in the state on (a) expanding ASL and interpretation education programs; (b) creating educational incentives, such as tuition support, credit enhancement, or alternative route programs; and (c) establishing bridge, endorsement, or alternative programs for native ASL users and certified interpreters seeking teacher certification.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026, except the formation of the working group is effective January 1, 2027.

§§ 2, 6 & 7 — PARAEDUCATORS HEALTH CARE SUBSIDY AND COST STUDY

The act makes permanent two health care subsidy programs for paraeducators employed by local or regional boards of education and expands the programs to include paraeducators at charter schools. Under prior law, the programs expired on June 30, 2025.

One program subsidizes paraeducators who (1) open a health savings account (HSA) or are Medicare-eligible and (2) enroll in a high deductible health plan (HDHP). The subsidy covers a percentage, determined by the comptroller, of the

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deductible for the paraeducator's health plan minus the amount of any employer contributions to an HSA or health reimbursement account.

The second program subsidizes school boards that cover paraeducators under an employer health plan (generally, a health insurance plan) or the partnership plan (a health benefit plan the comptroller offers to nonstate public employers and certain others). The subsidy covers up to 10% of the aggregate premium cost (including both the employee and employer shares) the board of education paid for the coverage, divided by the number of board-employed paraeducators enrolled in the health plan. The subsidy must be used to offset the paraeducators' share of the premium.

The act also eliminates an obsolete provision.

Use of Unexpended Funds for the Paraeducators Health Subsidy (§§ 2 & 7)

The act requires the education commissioner to determine if there are any unexpended funds in the aspiring educators scholarship program for FY 26 and if so, she must transfer up to \$300,000 of the unexpended funds to the paraeducators subsidy program for its expansion to paraeducators at charter schools for FY 27. This must be done by July 15, 2026, through a memorandum of understanding with the comptroller.

The act also requires the comptroller to calculate the cost of expanding the subsidy to include paraeducators employed by charter schools. By January 1, 2027, the comptroller must submit the cost calculation to the Appropriations and Education committees.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026, except the requirement to calculate the cost of expanding the subsidy and report it to the legislature is effective upon passage.

BACKGROUND

Alliance Districts

The alliance district program requires each of the state's 36 lowest performing school districts (as measured by the accountability index scores) to submit an improvement plan to SDE for approval before the department releases the district's alliance funding (a portion of the annual education cost sharing grant that these districts receive). The plan must detail how it intends to use its alliance funding and how this will increase student achievement.

Public School Information System

By law, SDE must administer this system to (1) establish a standardized electronic data collection and reporting protocol to comply with state and federal reporting requirements, (2) improve the exchange of information from school-to-school and district-to-district, and (3) maintain the confidentiality of individual student and teacher data. In addition to students and teachers, the system includes data on individual schools and districts and preschool children (CGS § 10-10a(b)

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& (c)).