

Top CT school priorities are emerging. Statewide cellphone ban, AI and more targeted

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When Connecticut lawmakers convene for the legislative session Feb. 4, they will try to address a number of problems plaguing schools: federal funding cuts, inflation, soaring special education costs and cell phones.

Leaders of the Education Committee plan to file legislation this session to increase the Education Cost Sharing formula to align with inflation and to implement a statewide ban on cell phones in schools. How schools should or should not use artificial intelligence is also a subject of discussion.

ECS- Education Cost Sharing

Rep. Jennifer Leeper, D-Fairfield, the co-chair of the Education Committee, said “the top issue this session will be increasing the Education Cost Sharing grant so that the foundation amount, which hasn’t been adjusted since 2013 begins to increase commensurate with inflation.

The ECS grant provides the majority of state education funding, distributing over \$2.4 billion annually to local and regional public school districts.

“While we did ‘fully fund’ the ECS phase-in last session, that was the amount the legislature determined that districts needed back in 2017,” Leeper said in an email. “As you can imagine our districts have been struggling with this slow phase-in in the face of persistent inflation and costs like insurance and transportation far outpacing inflation.”

The base of the ECS formula is known as the foundation “or the statutory cost that is intended to reflect the cost to educate a student without additional learning needs,” according to the School + State Finance Project.

The current foundation is \$11,525, which has not been modified since 2013, according to the School + State Finance Project.

In a report released last summer, the School + State Finance Project said that “while the state does provide equalization aid through the Education Cost Sharing grant, there is no cap on how much localities can contribute to their local districts.

“As a result, districts with greater wealth are able to raise far more for their schools, while lower-wealth districts are often unable to raise sufficient funds to meet their students’ needs — no matter how great those needs may be,” the report said.

Kate Dias, president of the Connecticut Education Association, said the base of the ECS formula is stuck in time, calling it “deeply problematic.”

“Putting in some sort of inflation adjustment at the very least is an important place to look,” she said.

She said that Connecticut is sixth in the country for per pupil expenditures and 46th for the state’s contribution.

“What that creates is a real magnification of the haves and the have nots,” she said. “And what it fundamentally tells us is that, at the end of the day, we have a flaw in our funding formula that’s creating that gap ...”

Patrice McCarthy, executive director and general counsel, Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, said it takes \$20,000 to educate a student today.

She said if the state were to increase the foundation of the ECS formula, adjusting for inflation over the years, it would be somewhere around \$16,000 per student.

The School + State Finance Project estimates that implementing an inflation-based foundation adjustment would require an additional \$2.96 billion investment from the state.

Statewide ban on cell phones

Leeper said another priority is to make schools cell phone-free statewide to “ensure that our children have a distraction-free learning environment.

“The data on the benefits of going phone-free bell to bell are unambiguous and very well supported,” Leeper said. “As a state, we are behind the national trend on this issue.”

There are currently 19 states with bell-to-bell policies banning cell phones in schools.

Superintendents in four Connecticut districts that implemented cell phone bans over the past few years have reported improvements in a number of areas. Officials in Torrington, Waterbury, Manchester and New Haven have said they’re seeing fewer discipline referrals, increased student engagement, and some are reporting marked improvements in academic achievement.

A new study in JAMA published this month found that 13 to 18-year-olds spend more “than 8.5 hours daily on screen based entertainment.” The study said that smartphone “use has been associated with poor physical health, mental health and academic outcomes.”

The CEA and CABE shared differing views on banning cell phones in schools.

“We think that it is unnecessary because virtually every district in the state already has a policy or has a policy under discussion,” said McCarthy.

She said the ban should be decided locally.

“In high school we are preparing students to function outside of this school environment, whether it be in the workplace or in college,” she said. “And they’re going to need to be able to self-regulate, not just say no because it’s the rule.”

Dias said data shows that access to cell phones and social media is detrimental to students’ outcomes.

She said she has seen positive changes to school systems when a cell phone ban is implemented.

“We are confident that this is a solution that makes sense in the state of Connecticut,” she said. “But we’re also mindful that this needs to be a conversation. It can’t be something that’s just done to people. It needs to be something that is part of a bigger conversation.”

Fran Rabinowitz, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, said there are a number of superintendents who believe a cell phone ban should be implemented at the local level while others say it would be easier to have a statewide cell phone ban.

Other top concerns

The uncertainty over federal funding of education remains another issue education leaders are weighing ahead of this session.

“I think that’s an extraordinary pressure that we’re really trying to navigate mindfully because there’s no question that there’s going to be federal shifts that negatively impact state funding,” Dias said. “I’m also deeply concerned about things in the Big Beautiful Bill that really lean into how do we cut federal resources or create voucher programs that incentivize privatization of public education.”

Rabinowitz said it is integral to ensure that “everybody believes that public education is a cornerstone of our democracy and that teachers need to be highly respected professionals.”

The impact of AI on education also remains a topic of much discussion.

McCarthy called it a “teachable moment.”

There are currently no specific state statutes or uniform statewide policies governing how K–12 schools must use artificial intelligence. The Connecticut State Department of Education is developing AI guidance for districts statewide in partnership with the Commission for Educational Technology.

“Our goal is to provide districts with clear, practical guidance that supports intentional policy, sound governance, and strong safeguards — ensuring that both educators and students are protected and prepared to navigate the opportunities and disruptions that artificial intelligence may bring,” said Chief Academic Officer Irene Parisi in an email. “By moving thoughtfully now, we position ourselves to respond effectively as new technologies enter the classroom.”

Concerning special education, Rabinowitz said there is a need for providing a continuum of services for students, ensuring there is an opportunity for intervention prior to putting a child in special education.

“I think we need to see special ed on a continuum and there should be a system of intervention of which special ed is part of that,” she said. “I think many districts because they have been spending so much money on special ed that they don’t always have the ability to have a robust system of intervention with reading, tutoring or behavior intervention prior to a student being identified for special ed.”

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