



Task Force to Study the Comprehensive Needs of Children in the State

MEETING MINUTES

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2024

3:00 PM VIA ZOOM AND [YOUTUBE LIVE](#)

Members in Attendance:

Dr. Alicia Roy, Retired Educator, Formerly Principal, North Canaan Elementary School, Co-Chair

Dr. Christopher Trombly, Interim Dean, Southern CT State University, Co-Chair

Christine Velasquez, Health Program Associate, Department of Public Health

Irene Parisi, Chief Academic Officer, CT State Department of Education

Mark Vanacore

Dr. Linda Dixon, Transitional Supports & Success Administrator, Department of Children and Families

Mark Polzella, Deputy Director, CT Department of Labor

Jennifer Jones, Education Consultant, Office of Early Childhood

Katie Durand, Housing Specialist, CT Department of Housing

Kayleigh Royston, Director of Government Affairs, CT Department of Agriculture

The meeting was called to order at 3:02 p.m. by Co-Chair Dr. Alicia Roy.

Dr. Roy welcomed everyone and confirmed that the supporting documents had been uploaded to the shared Google Drive and the legislative website. She noted that Tanya was unable to attend but had sent updates regarding the Kids Court Academy, which would be included in the report. Dr. Roy also mentioned that new information from the LEAP program and the Blue Ribbon Panel would be added to the report.

Dr. Christopher Trombly provided a summary of his outreach efforts since the last meeting. He had contacted the Connecticut School Counselor Association and Community Action Agencies (CAA) to gather data about school and out-of-school programs supported by federal COVID relief funds. Six responses were received from school counselors, who reported that marginalized students, including

those with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students of color, were the most negatively affected by the pandemic. There was some disagreement about the continuation of free lunch programs, but it was clear that students already receiving services before the pandemic were disproportionately impacted. Additionally, Dr. Trombly shared those responses from CAA directors indicated that families relying on these agencies also faced significant challenges due to the pandemic. This information would be crucial in identifying programs that should continue receiving funding.

Dr. Roy asked if there were any questions or additional updates from members. She reiterated that the shared Google folder was available for any documents members wished to contribute. The focus would be on integrating input from various state agencies to strengthen the final report, which would build on the recommendations from the 2020 report.

Mark Polzella from the Department of Labor shared his department's efforts to address the needs of youth during the pandemic, particularly focusing on food insecurity and mental health. He highlighted that youth employment programs had to be adapted to address the unique challenges posed by school closures and mental health concerns. Mr. Polzella offered to send an email summarizing his findings for inclusion in the final report. Dr. Roy echoed the need for any available data and emphasized that ongoing issues such as food insecurity still needed to be addressed, even though federal funding was running out.

Dr. Trombly discussed the task force's legislative charge, which included recommending which COVID relief-funded programs should continue receiving state support. He mentioned the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) had published a comprehensive report on state programs funded by federal recovery dollars. This report, which highlighted programs related to children, would serve as a reference for the task force's recommendations. Dr. Trombly suggested the report would help illustrate where federal funds were successfully addressing needs and where gaps might remain.

The task force then reviewed several key recommendations from their previous reports. Dr. Trombly emphasized the importance of continuing programs that addressed mental health, school lunches, and after-school programs. He noted that many of these programs were vital in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations.

Christine Velasquez from the Department of Public Health provided an update on school-based health centers, noting that federal funding from the CDC (\$12 million) had ended in June 2024, and ARPA funding (\$10 million) would expire in 2026. She expressed concern over the sustainability of these centers, particularly due to the healthcare workforce shortage. Billing remains a challenge, especially for nonprofits, which do not receive the same reimbursement rates as community health centers. Ms. Velasquez emphasized the need for long-term state funding to support the services provided by school-based health centers, which currently support 90 sites through the Department of Public Health's \$10 million annual funding. The expiration of federal funding could severely impact the continuation of these services.

Kayleigh Royston from the Department of Agriculture shared that the Farmers Market Nutrition Program had successfully transitioned to electronic benefits, which allowed better tracking and led to record-breaking redemption rates. The transition was supported by a federal grant that covered the purchase of tablets and Wi-Fi for farmers' markets. She confirmed that the program had been expanded using federal funds, and participation would likely continue increasing if sustained support is secured.

Katie Durand discussed rising rates of family homelessness, noting that the number of students experiencing homelessness had also increased since the pandemic. The department had used \$400 million in ARPA funds for eviction prevention and rental assistance through programs like UniteCT, which would be ending soon without further funding. Durand expressed the need to continue these programs, as their absence could significantly impact at-risk families.

Dr. Linda Dixon from the Department of Children and Families raised concerns about transportation barriers, especially for young adults pursuing post-secondary education and employment opportunities. She noted that ARPA funds had been critical in providing transportation for summer programs, particularly in rural areas. Dr. Roy agreed, noting that transportation had been a major issue for families attempting to access school and work during the pandemic.

Mark Vanacore raised the issue of teacher shortages, particularly concerning the lack of access to Social Security for educators. He explained that this issue was a major factor in teacher retention, with many educators opting for early retirement due to financial concerns. Mr. Vanacore suggested that this topic should be included in the task force's recommendations, as it directly impacts the workforce available to support students and families.

The task force discussed the importance of including both quantitative data and personal stories in the final report to illustrate the real-world impact of these programs. Dr. Roy encouraged all members to submit any additional information, data, or case studies that could support their recommendations. She reiterated the need to make a strong case for the continued funding of essential programs, particularly in the areas of mental health, education, and food security.

Dr. Roy announced that the next meeting would be held on November 6, 2024, and that a draft of the final report would be ready for review at that time. She thanked all members for their input and encouraged them to continue sharing data through the shared Google Drive.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:54 p.m.