

Local Government of the Future Subcommittee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Note: This document is ACIR staff notes written during this subcommittee meeting. It is a public document and has been provided to meeting participants for their review and revised in accordance with any comments received but is not approved minutes of the meeting.

An audio recording is available at:

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/ACIR/Meetings/2021/2021-03-02_ACIR_LGF_telemeeting.mp3

Members present:

Debra Borrero (alt.), Maureen Brummett, John Filchak, Leah Grenier (alt.), Martin Heft, Marcia Leclerc, Brian O'Connor (alt.), Francis Pickering, Brendan Sharkey (Chair)

Other Participants:

Peter Hopko, Eric Lindquist, Richard Porth, Fran Rabinowitz

ACIR staff: Bruce Wittchen

1. Call to order

Commission chair Sharkey called the meeting to order at 10:33 and explained remote meeting procedures.

3. Discussion of Local Government of the Future initiative

Commission chair Sharkey recapped the previous week's subcommittee meeting ([Meeting Notes](#); [Meeting Recording](#)) and outlined the goal for this meeting. Referring to the meeting notes, he said the focus today is to narrow the recommendations to be provided to the full ACIR, working with Fran Rabinowitz of [CT Assoc. of Public School Superintendents](#) (CAPSS), which prepared the [Blueprint to Transform Connecticut's Public Schools](#). The intent is to identify recommendations that the full ACIR can endorse.

Commission chair Sharkey noted the expected federal [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#) (ESSER) funds to be received by the state and said that funding perhaps can be redirected to priorities identified in the blueprint rather than to what the state had already committed to pay for. He noted that Ms. Rabinowitz has compiled a narrowed list of priorities as requested at this group's previous meeting.

Ms. Rabinowitz referred to the [GANTT chart](#) that has been updated to identify priority items that might be fundable by ESSER and to include their estimated costs. Commission chair Sharkey shared the spreadsheet on his screen. Ms. Rabinowitz described how the blueprint was developed and explained CAPSS's concern about the potential of certain recommendation being adopted but not others. She recommended the blueprint be adopted in full and implemented in stages. She recapped the recommendations discussed in previous meetings and highlighted the recommended sequence of implementation in the next three years.

Ms. Rabinowitz mentioned that some of the bills introduced this session address some of the actions recommended by CAPSS, but not noted there is opposition to some, such as the recommendation for [Regional Education Service Centers](#) (RESCs) to take on adult education. Commission chair Sharkey asked about the cost for actions recommended this year and Ms. Rabinowitz asked if CAPSS is on track

in recommending the state not reduce [education cost sharing](#) (ECS) to any town in 2021 and begin 2.5% annual increases in 2022, or begin those increases now.

There was a discussion of this recommendation and Ms. Rabinowitz said eliminating the ECS reductions to towns would cost the state \$7 million in 2021. Commission alternate O'Connor said the CT Conference of Municipalities (CCM) is testifying in favor of doing that. Ms. Rabinowitz said the recommendation having the highest cost is for full funding of excess costs of special education, at \$70 million and ESSER could cover most of that.

There was further discussion of the blueprint and of pending legislation and Commission member Leclerc asked that a column of cost estimated for each recommendation for each recommendation be added to the GANTT chart. Ms. Rabinowitz said she will do that and it will be circulated to the group. Commission member Filchak noted the high price tag over time and asked how it will be funded, through existing revenue or new revenue?

Ms. Rabinowitz agreed the proposed annual rise in ECS will be expensive over time and require new revenue. She said CAPSS is looking at federal funding for the excess costs of special education and Commission member Filchak said people have been looking for that since 1975. He asked if CAPSS is looking at increased sales tax or income tax for the increased state funding and Ms. Rabinowitz said they have not put forward a plan for how to fund it.

Commission alternate Borrero noted that the blueprint does not provide magnet school funding and Ms. Rabinowitz outlined the reasons for not including such a recommendation, including equity concerns regarding magnet schools. There was further discussion of magnet schools. Richard Porth said the blueprint is well done and shows how the plan can be implemented in chunks. He commented on the plan zeroing in on special education and noted that had also been a focus of the Governor's transition team.

Mr. Porth asked if anyone has calculated the expected cost increase if cost-saving mechanisms in the blueprint are not implemented. Ms. Rabinowitz said that was not done as part of this, but CAPSS is concerned about the rapid increase in special education costs. She mentioned hearing that special education is now 35% of Hartford's education budget and 22% of the school population is identified as special education.

Ms. Rabinowitz said schools should do more before identifying children as special education. She added that schools have not intervened as well as they should and noted that a teacher of a child needing additional help with reading in a school without a reading teacher can only obtain extra service by identifying a child as special education.

Ms. Rabinowitz said there is interest in looking at over-identification and described alternative approaches, but noted that another problem is that CT schools bear the burden of proof of demonstrating that a child does not require special education if parents desire a specific program. There was further discussion of options for intervening with children without identifying them as special education and Ms. Rabinowitz emphasized the importance early reading for later success. She said CAPSS recommends more regional approaches, but early intervention is important too, not just special education.

Commission alternate O'Connor asked if CAPSS has an estimate of the cost to improve early intervention and Ms. Rabinowitz said they do not. She pointed out, however, that Bridgeport had considered a program that would have cost \$2 million. Commission alternate Grenier reiterated statements by Commission member Demsey at the previous subcommittee meeting urging caution about the use of ESSER funds and recommending that increased funding be connected to improved performance. She noted that it is unclear how the subcommittee intends to proceed.

Commission chair Sharkey said this group can vote to send Ms. Rabinowitz's recommendation to the full ACIR for its consideration, potentially with a more narrowly focused recommendation to the Governor regarding implementation of the recommendations for 2021, leveraging ESSER funds. That would require the state fund its previous commitments using state funds and using ESSER funds to implement blueprint recommendations. Ms. Rabinowitz said she will provide the previously discussed cost estimates.

Commission member Filchak pointed out the expanded role for RESCs in the [Regional Performance Incentive Program](#) (RPIP) proposal developed by the ACIR's Local Government of the Future initiative (see [HB 6448](#)). He asked if there should be a linkage between that and the CAPSS blueprint to give more weight to RESC initiatives. He noted that it might be too specific. Commission chair Sharkey said his reaction is to avoid having that RPIP proposal be wrapped up with the CAPSS blueprint. There was further discussion of the relationship between them and Commission member Filchak expressed his concern about expanding programs that will fall back on local property taxes.

Commission chair Sharkey said expected costs are going to be provided and he believes it would be fair for this group to adopt Ms Rabinowitz's recommendations today without those numbers, with the proviso that that the updated version will be reviewed for Friday's ACIR meeting. The group might withdraw its recommendation to the ACIR at that time. A motion was made and seconded to recommend the full ACIR endorse the proposal, with the proviso that the recommendation might be withdrawn following receipt of the additional information.

Commission chair Sharkey said he will draft a letter for the ACIR's consideration for conveying its recommendation to the Governor if the ACIR votes to do so. He noted this will be tricky document requiring tact and care. There was further discussion of the drafting and circulation of that draft to streamline the inclusion of edits by others. Eric Lindquist said he can help make it available as a [Google Document](#).

4. Next steps

Mr. Porth reiterated the value of estimating the potential savings available by implementing the blueprint. He also highlighted the equity issues and added that even order of magnitude estimates of savings would help. Commission chair noted the importance of the potential equity gains and cost savings for advancing the ACIR's RPIP proposal. Ms Rabinowitz said she will be available by phone if needed during Friday's ACIR meeting.

5. Adjourn

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting and the meeting was adjourned at 11:29.

Notes prepared by Bruce Wittchen, OPM