



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:  
PRESS CONTACT:**

June 10, 2024  
Dr. Scott Nicol, Superintendent of Schools  
(860) 896-2300

## **Ellington Schools Awarded Governor M. Jodi Rell Center for Public Service at the University of Hartford Annual Civility Award**

**ELLINGTON, CT** - On Sunday, June 9, 2024, the Ellington Public Schools was awarded the Governor M. Jodi Rell Center for Public Service at the University of Hartford Annual Civility Award for its Seeds of Civility initiative.

The civility award is representative of the Rell Center’s philosophy which promotes integrity in government and public service as well as responsible participation in public life. The Center believes civil discourse is critical to the strength and robustness of our democratic systems with integrity being a lifelong pursuit.

Former Governor Rell and Director of the Rell Center, Katherine Owens conveyed, *“We believe that projects like Ellington Public Schools’ Seeds of Civility are so important to American society at this point in time when so many forces are pushing public life to be less civil and more antagonistic. We appreciate your efforts to instill the fair exchange of ideas throughout your community.”*

Ellington’s Seeds of Civility initiative began in 2019 and was led by Superintendent of Schools Dr. Scott Nicol with a committee of elected officials, town and school staff, and Ellington residents. The foundational document has seven tenets (*see below*) that serve as strategies for civil discourse. The document was unanimously endorsed by Ellington’s Boards of Selectmen, Finance, and Education.

*“As an elected official, I was proud to endorse the Seeds of Civility. One tenet—Speak One’s Truth—is especially challenging because it emphasizes communicating ‘even when others may react with anger’. Often, when the public learns of the history of an issue or event it can be uncomfortable and in some cases shocking—yet, as leaders we have access and it is our duty to communicate these truths.”*

**—Ellington Board Chair Jennifer Dzen**

Ellington’s Seeds of Civility was courageously applied by the Board of Education in December 2021 when endorsing a letter to CT Commissioner Manitha Juthani, M.D. (*see below*). The letter expressed concern over a State policy that would have publicly stigmatized students based upon their medical status—vaccinated or unvaccinated—when requiring the unvaccinated to wear masks when playing sports. Ultimately, the State retracted this policy decision.

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# SEEDS OF CIVILITY

## To Promote a Fair Exchange of Ideas

Civility is defined as caring for one's identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process (Institute for Civility in Government). The Town of Ellington, CT and the Ellington Public Schools recognize the value of civil discussion. Residents are encouraged to democratically participate in all community matters even when it may be uncomfortable. We live together and create together. To civilly compromise is to admirably evolve as a community.



We Promise To Promote a Fair Exchange of Ideas by Living the Following:

### 1 LISTEN, OBSERVE AND REFLECT

We will be careful and thoughtful seeking to understand first and then act with honor.

### 2 ASSUME GOOD INTENTIONS

We will engage with others, assuming their positions are for the greater good.

### 3 ALLOW FOR EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

We will recognize that conflict is challenging and can be emotional, and we will strive to respond with understanding.

### 4 SPEAK ONE'S TRUTH

We will communicate our truth as we know it and with respect even when others may react with anger.

### 5 FACE TO FACE

We will make every effort to engage others directly and not through social media which tends to make the conflict worse.

### 6 FIND SIMILARITIES, VALUE DIFFERENCES

We will recognize that similarities exist among all people, and we will respect our differences.

### 7 DEBATE THE ISSUE, RESPECT THE PERSON

We will recognize that we are all human beings trying to live a fulfilling life, and we will engage on issues and avoid personal criticism.

*"So let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof.*

*Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.*

*Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us."*

— JOHN F. KENNEDY



ENDORSED BY THE ELLINGTON BOARDS OF  
EDUCATION, FINANCE, AND SELECTMEN





# Ellington Public Schools

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December 10, 2021

Commissioner Manitha Juthani, M.D.  
Connecticut Department of Public Health  
410 Capitol Avenue  
Hartford CT 06134

**Re: Concerns of Differentiated Masking Policies for Vaccinated and Unvaccinated Students**

Dear Commissioner Juthani:

The Ellington Board of Education writes to express its concerns regarding the direction of potential guidance creating distinctions between students whose families make different legally protected medical decisions, specifically on the choice to vaccinate, or not, against COVID-19.

The Ellington Public Schools has been a leader in efforts combating the pandemic. Our concern about the holistic health of our children continues to be the driving force in our decision making during these trying times. Using DPH/SDE guidance, we were able to return students to full session on October 5, 2020. We implemented many layers of mitigation—from masks to ventilation, to contact tracing—that allowed our students and staff to remain safe at school.

Recent Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC) guidance and comments expressed on the weekly Departments of Public Health and Education (DPH/SDE) COVID-19 Health and Safety Meetings, as attended by Ellington Superintendent of Schools Dr. Scott Nicol, indicates a direction of moving towards different policies for vaccinated and unvaccinated students. Already the Board must choose if it will implement a policy that distinguishes between student-athletes whose families have made different medical decisions, allowing vaccinated athletes to decide not to wear a mask when playing in basketball, ice hockey and indoor track events, whereas unvaccinated athletes will be required to wear a mask.

The Board recognizes the effectiveness of vaccines to combat COVID-19. We believe that every family should strongly consider getting their children vaccinated after consultation with their medical providers. The Ellington Public Schools ran and promoted vaccine clinics for staff and students in the spring. At last check, 72.26% of children ages 12-17 had initiated vaccination, ranking Ellington in the top third of all communities in the state.

However, we do have concerns about policy that visibly distinguishes between students whose families may choose different medical paths. These are detailed below:

- Such policies create potential compliance issues with the Family Educational Records Protection Act ("FERPA"). The only way that a school can know of a student's lack of vaccination and the reasons for it are through the receipt of student records from the family. Taking that information and publicly identifying the student by requiring a visible marker may be a direct violation of FERPA and associated regulations (34 CFR §99.30).
- Policy options whereby only the unvaccinated would be required to mask presents such students as potential targets for discrimination and harassment within the school setting. We have heard reports from within our

community about the exclusion of students and families who are unvaccinated from social settings. We are concerned such a visible distinction could deepen divides within the community and spill over into our schools.

- Decisions to vaccinate cut along demographic lines by socio-economic status, race, and religious convictions. The Board does not wish to see an unintentional distinction between students based on protected demographics.

These decisions are highly complex, taking into consideration both long-standing and emerging scientific evidence, but also education-based factors, policy consistency and risk tolerance. Following science is not an absolute, black-or-white proposition, but one filled with gradation. Other nearby states such as New Jersey deemed masks optional for the vaccinated and unvaccinated in all high school and youth sporting events. The CIAC, in consultation with Connecticut State Medical Society's (CSMS) Sports Medicine Committee, composed of medical professionals including infectious disease specialists, also provided options with similar mask-optional guidance for all.

At this point in time, all K-12 students are eligible to be vaccinated. Families can legally make that choice for themselves and their children. Families that don't make this choice are implicitly deciding to take on additional risk based on communicated public health guidance. We recognize that some of this risk affects the broader school community.

However, the Board believes that future state guidance should continue in the policy direction of past decades: to remove visibly stigmatizing practices in schools (e.g. school lunch) and build more inclusive environments for all students. Any well-intentioned public health policy, guidance, or legislation currently under consideration—be it through Executive emergency powers or legislative process—that would make visible differences between students from K-12 based on any characteristic is a reversion to the stigmatizing practices of the past.

The Board is encouraged by your recent statements around off-ramping from the emergency protocols put in place. We are also aware that this pandemic is a fluid situation and increases in cases and new variants require constant monitoring and adjustments to be made. Like you, we are hopeful that we are nearing the end of the most restrictive pandemic-era restrictions as we move into the next phase of our response.

We appreciate your efforts and consideration. Please direct any inquiries to Ellington's Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Scott Nicol at 860-896-2300 or snicol@ellingtonschools.net.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Dzen, Chair



Dr. Michael Young, Vice-Chair



Jennifer Mullin, Secretary



Gary Blanchette



Angela Moser



Steve Viens



Marica Kupferschmid



Kerry Socha

C: CT Commissioner of Education, C. Russell-Tucker  
CT Interscholastic Athletic Conference,  
Executive Director, G. Lungarini  
CT Association of Public School Superintendent,  
F. Rabinowitz  
CT Association of Boards of Education, R. Rader

CT State Senators and House Representatives  
CT Superintendents of Schools  
Ellington Superintendent of Schools, S. Nicol  
Members of the CT State Board of Education  
Members of CT Boards of Education