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Testimony of
Ray Rossomando
Before the
Committee on Children

Re: HB 7215 AAC Safe School Climate Policies

March 5, 2019

Good afternoon Senator Abrams, Representative Linehan, Senator Kelly, and Representative Green, and distinguished members of the Committee on Children. My name is Ray Rossomando, and I am the Director of Policy, Research, and Government Relations for the Connecticut Education Association, an organization representing active and retired teachers from over 150 school districts across Connecticut.

We thank the chairs for raising this bill on such an important issue. CEA supports HB 7215 and thanks the proponents for seeking our feedback as the language was coming to draft.

As our members often point out, children are increasingly exhibiting behaviors that cry out for additional resources, new strategies, and stronger human relationships. School-level responses to these cries have not been sufficient, with children's needs often remaining unmet. This is a significant concern of our members that CEA is seeking to address this session. HB 7215, along with HB 7110 (AAC Enhanced Classroom Safety and School Climate), which is under consideration in the Education Committee, seeks to address these needs.

HB 7215 places an emphasis on the culture and climate of a school, with an added emphasis on prevention. We support the bill's emphasis on trauma-informed strategies, restorative practices, and social-emotional development. We also applaud its focus on human relationships in the school building to promote a positive culture and climate for teaching and learning.

The solutions to these issues have one common denominator. They require whole-school support and buy-in. This means that for schools to be trauma-informed, to be able to integrate restorative practices consistently for all children, and to focus on prevention, all staff (from the superintendent and building administrators to teachers and para-educators) need to be on the same page.

However, achieving this whole-school buy-in has been a challenge. From our observations, children who are aggressive or who bully others do so repeatedly because they are not getting the support they need. In many districts, incidents that warrant attention are being swept under the rug by administrators. The cycle repeats.

Schools that break this cycle do so by ensuring that the child receives attention, that educators are involved in the interventions to address the child's needs, that administrators work together with teachers, and that relationships among students and adults in the school are nurtured. Such functioning exemplifies a positive school climate and culture. By focusing on school climate and requiring better,

more valid climate surveys, HB 7215 could help more districts break this cycle by helping them identify areas where positive school climate and culture break down.

HB 7215 as drafted is an excellent start, and we think that with some additional work, it could be a great bill. CEA asks that the committee review the following items for further enhancements:

1. The refined definition of bullying to include aggression and harm-doing is helpful; however, the shift from the effects of bullying to specific acts of bullying in lines 17-26 could be refined.
2. While HB 7215 places on emphasis on school climate that has long been needed, it could be even more fully enhanced, as this is the key to success (see additional background on school climate below).
3. Additionally, the improvements to interventions and emphasis on prevention are positive but could further benefit from formal assurances that teachers will be included throughout discussions and decisions about such strategies. This is a positive feature of school culture that cannot be overlooked.

Furthermore, as this bill proceeds through the legislative process, we ask that you consider its interaction with [HB 7110 AAC Enhanced Classroom Safety and School Climate](#), which we also support.

Thank you.

Please see attached CEA Policy Brief on School Climate

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School Climate and Culture

Connecticut Education Association
Policy Brief 2018-02

The hallmark of any successful school reform is that it is done “with” educators, and not “to” them.

Many factors contribute to improving student achievement. One important factor is the learning environment, or as it is sometimes called, the school climate. A school’s climate reflects the shared ideas--assumptions, values, beliefs--and practices that define its culture and standards for expected behavior.¹

There is mounting evidence that a positive school climate increases student achievement.² A school climate that contributes to learning focuses on essential components, including safety and strong relationships between teaching and learning.³

What Is School Climate?

There is not a national consensus on what constitutes *school climate*; however, there are evolving standards intended to enhance the quality and character of daily school life where all members of the school community are welcomed, supported, and feel safe.⁴ In Connecticut, school climate is defined as “... the quality and character of school life with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community between and among students and adults.”⁵

Students have better academic outcomes when they go to school every day; therefore, a school with a welcoming learning environment is crucial to reducing absenteeism. Physical or emotional trauma (bullying, teasing) takes a great toll on students, leading some to be fearful of attending school, which negatively affects student learning.^{6,7} Students need a stress-free school environment where they feel they belong and are supported. Not surprisingly, research shows that improving the school climate leads to better academic performance.^{8,9}

When there is a diverse student body, the school climate must be sensitive to cultural differences and at the same time foster strong relationships among students and between students, parents, and teachers. A school with a culture of mutual trust and respect engages participants and fosters a relationship between teaching and learning that will improve childhood health and academic achievement.^{10,11}

¹ Tableman, B. & Herron, A. (2004.) School climate and learning. *Best Practice Brief*. (31).

² Hirsch, E., Sioberg, A., Robertson, J., & Church, K. (2011). *Improving teacher working conditions: Lessons from North Carolina schools*. Retrieved from http://ncteachingconditions.org/sites/default/files/attachments/NC10_brief_ImprovingTWC.pdf

³ Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2010). *School climate brief*, 1(1).

⁴ National School Climate Center. (2009). *National School Climate Center*. Retrieved October 15, 2018, from Policy Publications: <https://www.schoolclimate.org/themes/schoolclimate/assets/pdf/policy/school-climate-standards.pdf>

⁵ C.G.S. §10-222d(a)(9) at https://www.cga.ct.gov/current/pub/chap_170.htm#sec_10-222d

⁶ Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Zeira, A., & Vinokur, A. (2002). School climate, observed risky behaviors, and victimization as predictors of high school students’ fear and judgments of school violence as a problem, *Health Education & Behavior*, 29(6), 716-736.

⁷ Devine, J. & Cohen, J. (2007). *Making your school safe: Strategies to protect children and promote learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁸ Hirsch, E., Sioberg, A., Robertson, J., & Church, K. (2011). *Improving teacher working conditions: Lessons from North Carolina schools*. Retrieved from http://ncteachingconditions.org/sites/default/files/attachments/NC10_brief_ImprovingTWC.pdf

⁹ NEA Health Information Network. (2009). *Preventing and addressing violent behavior: Taking proactive steps for school safety*.

¹⁰ McNeely, C. A., Nonnemaker, J. M., & Blum, R. W. (2002). Promoting student connectedness to school: Evidence from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health. *Journal of School Health*, 72, 138-146.

¹¹ Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2010). *School climate brief*, 1(1).

What Is a School Climate Plan?

A school climate plan is a template for creating a school where students, parents, and teachers look forward to being every day. It reflects an infrastructure of ideas, values, and goals that make a school unique and sets standards for acceptable behavior.¹²

A school climate plan typically begins with a survey of students, parents, and teachers and ends with initiatives that lead to a positive school culture. There are different methods for measuring school climate.¹³ For example, Hartford Public Schools has its own [Climate Survey](https://www.hartfordschools.org/climate-survey/),¹⁴ and Fairfield Public Schools implements a survey titled [School Climate](http://fairfieldschools.org/district-information/school-climate/).¹⁵ A survey identifies important, measurable characteristics that are used to determine whether a school has a positive environment that fosters learning; the survey also identifies areas for improvement.

Student *engagement* can be measured in different contexts.¹⁶

Does students' behavior show they are engaged in school? Do they participate in clubs, band, athletics, or other after-school programs? Are students emotionally engaged in school? Are they happy to be in school? Are students academically engaged? Are they intimidated by math? Science?

Are students experiencing emotional *trauma* in school?¹⁷

Are students being bullied? Is a student being emotionally aggressive? Do students tease peers who are different? Are they physically aggressive? Do they kick or shove students in lower grades? Are they angry? Do they threaten to hurt others who make fun of them?

Do *teachers* want go to another school or stay?¹⁸

Have teachers participated in professional development activities? Was it useful? How much of a teacher's own money is spent on classroom supplies? How much input do teachers have in deciding the curriculum? Do parents support teachers? Are rules for student behavior consistently enforced? Do teachers collaborate?

How do *parents* perceive the school?¹⁹

Does the school staff help parents understand when their child needs to learn social, emotional, or character skills? Does the school ask parents to volunteer for school events? Is racial/ethnic conflict among students a problem at the school? At this school, how much of a problem is student drug use?

¹² Tableman, B. & Herron, A. (2004.) School climate and learning. *Best Practice Brief*. (31).

¹³ REL West. (2012). Summary of Existing School Climate Instruments for Middle School. Retrieved October 30, 2018, from <https://relwest.wested.org/resources/21>

¹⁴ Hartford Public Schools. 2017. Climate Survey. Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.hartfordschools.org/climate-survey/>.

¹⁵ Fairfield Public Schools. 2012. "School Climate." Fairfield Public Schools. Accessed October 15, 2018. <http://fairfieldschools.org/district-information/school-climate/>.

¹⁶ Fredricks, J., Wendy, M., Meli, J., Montrosse, B., Mordica, J., & Mooney, K. (2011). Measuring Student Engagement in Upper Elementary Through High School: A Description of 21 Instruments. Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved October 29, 2018, from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL_2011098.pdf

¹⁷ Hamburger, M., Basile, K., & Vivolo, A. (2011). Measuring Bullying Victimization, Perpetration, and Bystander Experiences: A Compendium of Assessment Tools. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved October 29, 2018, from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullycompendium-a.pdf>

¹⁸ NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS. (n.d.). TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE SCHOOLS AND STAFFING SURVEY 2011-12 SCHOOL YEAR. Retrieved October 29, 2018, from School and Staffing Survey: <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/pdf/1112/SASS4A.pdf>

¹⁹ National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *ED School Climate Surveys*. Retrieved October 29, 2018, from National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/EDSCLS_Questionnaires_112017.pdf

There are numerous other school characteristics that can be explored, such as students' emotional intelligence, language barriers, physical or intellectual boundaries, and more.

This wealth of information can be analyzed in different ways, such as by grade, gender, race, family income, travel time to/from school, etc. Findings might show that fifth-graders are engaged in school, but sixth-graders are not. Minorities may feel welcomed at the middle school but experience bullying at the high school. Students who have long bus rides are not behaviorally engaged, because they cannot participate in after-school activities.

After analyzing the answers to survey questions, specific problem areas are identified, and targeted policies--along with tangible remedies--are put in place.²⁰ These may include new policies, such as requiring students to wear uniform clothing or providing each student with a laptop to take home. New disciplinary rules may be implemented that are applied to all students equally. Recently, a Connecticut school district found that one in five students at one of their elementary schools did not feel safe in the hallways and bathrooms.²¹ When problems such as this are identified and remedied, those 40 students might be more eager to go to school every day, thereby reducing absenteeism and improving education outcomes. In another example, an urban school district found that two out of three students at a middle school reported being often teased or picked on.²² As a result of this information, the school district now provides teachers with tangible actions they can take to reduce teasing and improve school climate.²³

States vary in how they implement school climate plans,^{24,25,26} and sources for comprehensive school climate plans and surveys include [ED School Climate Surveys](#)²⁷, [Comprehensive School Climate Inventory](#)²⁸, [EASTConn School Climate Survey](#)²⁹, and [TELL](#)³⁰ (Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning). The [National School Climate Center also offers a survey](#), as well as [standards](#) for adoption.³¹ Such providers can serve as a one-stop shop for surveying, analyzing, and implementing school climate plans. Ideally, surveys used by school districts should be research-based and validated to ensure not only reliable results, but also some comparability across districts to help guide state policy and resource allocation.

Fewer People Want to Be Teachers

'Every teacher wants to be successful;' but sadly, a significant number of teachers are treated disrespectfully, threatened, or physically assaulted by students every year, resulting in a deteriorating

²⁰ National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2016). SCIRP: Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements. Retrieved from <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/quick-guide>

²¹ Fairfield Public Schools. (2017, January 1). Survey Response Summary Report for Burr Students 3-5. Retrieved October 30, 2018, from Fairfield Public Schools: <http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/district-information/school-climate-survey/2016/burr/Burr-Student.pdf>

²² Hartford Public Schools. (2018). Asian Studies Academy at Bellizzi Student Survey - Grades 3 & 4. Retrieved October 2018, 2018, from Hartford Public Schools: https://secure.panoramaed.com/hartford/understand/52440/survey_results/2821537#/questions/topics/12062

²³ Hartford Public Schools. (n.d.). *Playbook*. Retrieved October 30, 2018, from Hartford Public Schools: <https://playbook.panoramaed.com/topics>

²⁴ Piscatelli, Jennifer, and Chiqueena Lee. 2011. "Policy Publications." National School Climate Center. Accessed October 15, 2018.

https://schoolclimate.org/themes/schoolclimate/assets/pdf/policy/policy_brief.pdf.

²⁵ Moran, John D. 2016. "Connecticut General Assembly." Office of Legislative Research. September 15. Accessed October 15, 2018.

<https://www.cga.ct.gov/2016/rpt/pdf/2016-R-0169.pdf>.

²⁶ Moran, J., & Sullivan, M. (2016, September 15). School Climate Law in Connecticut and Selected States. Hartford, Connecticut: Connecticut General Assembly. Retrieved October 21, 2018, from

https://www.cga.ct.gov/ed/tfs/20160829_School%20Climate%20Task%20Force/20160915/OLR%20-%20School%20Climate%20Law%20Presentation.pdf

²⁷ U.S. Federal Department of Education. 2018. ED Schools Climate Survey. September 26. Accessed October 15, 2018.

<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/edscls>.

²⁸ CREC. (n.d.). School Climate & Bullying. Retrieved October 19, 2018, from CREC: <http://www.crec.org/bullying/csci.php>

²⁹ EASTConn. (n.d.). School Climate Survey. Retrieved October 30, 2018, from EASTConn: <https://www.eastconn.org/climatesurvey>

³⁰ New Teacher Center. (n.d.). *TELL Survey Initiative*. Retrieved October 29, 2018, from New Teacher Center:

<https://newteachercenter.org/approach-old/teaching-empowering-leading-and-learning-tell/>

³¹ <https://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/policy>

school climate.^{32,33 34,35,36} As a result, teaching is becoming an undesirable profession and is “ ... increasingly perceived as a profession to avoid.”³⁷

As many as three in 10 new teachers (30 percent) leave the profession in the first five years.³⁸ Of those who leave, one in five (19.9 percent) said they were *less safe* teaching than in their new occupation.³⁹ For every 100 people who entered a teacher-preparation program in 2009, there were only 65 entering in 2014. Some have argued that this is because fewer people view teaching as desirable.⁴⁰

In Connecticut, for several years there has been a shortage of hundreds of teachers, and the shortage will worsen as the state’s older teachers retire and there are not enough new graduates to replace them--especially in shortage subject areas.⁴¹ All Connecticut schools must be an attractive workplace for teachers too; otherwise, there will be an even more widespread shortage of qualified teachers in Connecticut’s K-12 classrooms. Once this happens, it will take a long time to restart a pipeline of qualified teachers.

³² Mitchell, Corey. 2018. "How Principals Can Banish Toxic Adult Behavior." *Education Week*. Accessed October 18, 2018. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/10/17/how-principals-can-banish-toxic-adult-behavior.html?cmp=eml-enl-eu-news1&M=58644127&U=2647626&UUID=0b306ce289e1f4de96759f2a4c566cc9>.

³³ Dworkin, A. G., Haney, C. A., & Telschow, R. L. (1998). Fear, victimization, and stress among urban public school teachers. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 9(2), 159-171.

³⁴ Dworkin, A. G., Haney, C. A., & Telschow, R. L. (1998). Fear, victimization, and stress among urban public school teachers. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 9(2), 159-171.

³⁵ Thomas, Jaqueline Rabe. (4/1/18) *CT Mirror*: "How one school district tackled assaults on teachers" <https://ctmirror.org/2018/04/01/two-kinds-safety-issues-facing-classroom-teacher/>

³⁶ Thomas, Jaqueline Rabe. (3/19/18) *CT Mirror*: "How Safe Are CT Schools" <https://ctmirror.org/2018/03/19/safe-ct-students-school/>

³⁷ Hansen, M. (2018, September 5). *Teachers aren't getting younger, we're just paying them less*. Retrieved October 30, 2018, from Brookings: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/09/05/teachers-arent-getting-younger-were-just-paying-them-less/>

³⁸ Hanna, R., & Pennington, K. (2015, January 8). Despite Reports to the Contrary, New Teachers Are Staying in Their Jobs Longer. Retrieved October 31, 2018, from Center for American Progress: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2015/01/08/103421/despite-reports-to-the-contrary-new-teachers-are-staying-in-their-jobs-longer/>

³⁹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2014, April 2). *Teacher Attrition and Mobility: Results From the 2012-13 Follow-up Survey First Look*. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved October 31, 2018, from National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014077.pdf>

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/08/09/enrollment-is-down-at-teacher-colleges-so.html> and <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-09-14/the-teacher-shortage-crisis-is-here>

⁴¹ Connecticut Teacher's Retirement Board. (2018, June 14). 2017-18 Subject Shortage Area or Priority School District Reemployment. Retrieved October 30, 2018, from Connecticut Teacher's Retirement Board: <https://www.ct.gov/trb/cwp/view.asp?Q=276124&A=1598>