

Testimony of
Katherine Field
Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

RE:

HB 7250 AAC the Improvement of Child Development Through Play
March 6, 2019

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and distinguished members of the Education Committee, my name is Kate Field, and I am the Teacher Development Specialist at the Connecticut Education Association, an organization representing active and retired teachers from over 150 school districts across Connecticut. I am here today to testify in favor of HB 7250, concerning the improvement of child development through play. CEA is strongly in support of this bill, although additional measures are also needed to ensure the scope and sequence of curriculum in the elementary grades is developmentally appropriate.

I imagine you are already aware of the robust research base on the critical importance of play in elementary school. Rather than reiterate what cognitive scientists and early education experts unanimously state regarding the critical importance of play, I would instead like to briefly tell you about a study that took place here in Connecticut in 2016-2017, conducted by CEA's Commission on Instruction and Professional Development (CIPD).

CIPD designed a study to examine the impact of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in grades K-2 in Connecticut's public schools. The study included 793 K-2 teachers, or roughly 26% of Connecticut's early elementary teaching population. The findings of this study paint a stark picture of the educational experience of our youngest learners in classrooms across Connecticut:

- 76% of teachers reported a moderate to dramatic decrease in time spent playing.
- 72% reported a moderate to dramatic increase in direct instruction since implementation of CCSS.
- Even more disturbing, 75% of teachers reported a moderate to dramatic increase in student stress and anxiety.
- 76% noted a moderate to dramatic increase in serious student misbehavior.

Kindergarteners are expected to do homework and are increasingly stressed. Over the course of the school year, they take multiple standardized tests specifically designed to measure deficits in skills that were likely cognitively inappropriate for their stage of brain development in the first place. What are we doing to our children?

Increasing the amount of time dedicated to undirected play is an excellent start, but it must be just that—a start. Play is the primary way young children learn to navigate the world, develop problem-solving skills, learn empathy, release stress, and develop imagination and a sense of wonder. As more demanding academic content gets pushed down into the lower grades, an unintended consequence is a narrowing of the curriculum to align with CCSS, which focuses entirely on math and literacy. The result—far less time for play-based learning, less undirected play, and less time for socialization and the development of social emotional skills.

Compare this to Finland, one of the highest-performing countries in the world academically, where children learn almost entirely through play until the age of eight. While the U.S. and Finland have different cultures, demographics, and child poverty rates, this should still give us pause. Children in Connecticut begin kindergarten as young as age four and are expected to perform academic work that is cognitively inappropriate for their age, which can cause frustration, anxiety, and stress. This is not the way to encourage children to love learning or want to come to school each day, nor is it setting them up for long-term academic success.

CEA wholeheartedly supports HB 7250 but urges policymakers to consider other measures as well. Alone, this bill is a good start, but on its own is insufficient, especially if the additional 25 minutes of play results in a reduction in time spent on art, music, and other disciplines that promote social emotional learning. It is our hope that as a result of this bill, playtime will supplant some of the time spent on core “academic” subjects, which would ultimately promote stronger child development.

If Connecticut wants to continue to produce innovators, problem-solvers, and critical thinkers, we must re-examine our early elementary standards, consult the cognitive scientists and early childhood experts who were ignored when the standards were first drafted, and make room in the school for play, joy, and a sense of wonder.