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Testimony of
Orlando Rodriguez
Connecticut Education Association
Before the
Black and Puerto Rican Caucus
February 25th, 2020
Re:

CEA Wants Safe & Compassionate Preventive Care for Students with Trauma

Good evening, Representative McGee, Representative Reyes, and members of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus. My name is Orlando Rodriguez. I serve as the Research and Policy Development Specialist for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA), which is the largest teachers' union in Connecticut, representing thousands of active and retired teachers of many races and ethnicities who inform our legislative priorities.

It is a hopeful sign that policymakers are discussing the negative consequences of trauma on the lives of children. However, it is disheartening that childhood trauma is more common than expected with tangible harmful consequences to the physical health, mental health, and educational achievement of students in the state's public schools.

In the report *Condition of Education 2016-2017*, the Connecticut State Department of Education states that Black students were "more than one-and-a-half times as likely as their nonblack peers to be identified with emotional disturbance...." This is not surprising as most black children in Connecticut live in urban areas where as many as 3 in 4 children – 39% to 75% before age 16 – are affected by at least one traumatic experience. In short, children are more likely to have stress-filled daily experiences when they live in impoverished areas, which is mostly in urban areas where most minority children live, as well as some rural areas of eastern Connecticut.

CEA proposes legislation with a set of solutions to start to alleviate the toxic stress students are experiencing from daily traumatic events that go untreated.

- 1) We need **free universal preschool**.
- 2) In Connecticut, children can start kindergarten *before* they are five years old, which is too young for most children. For this reason, most states require children to be *at least* five years old. We should change the **kindergarten start age to be five by September 1st**.

- 3) Too many of our schools have budgets that pay for a police-like presence of School Resource Officer (SROs); however, they do not spend enough on counselors, social workers, or school psychologists. SROs address undesirable student behavior after the fact. CEA wants to prevent undesirable student behavior from happening, so there is no need for SROs. National standards set a maximum of 250 students for each social worker or counselor, as well as a maximum of 500-700 students for each school psychologist. We need **more support staff in our schools** to help students overcome those non-academic problems in their lives that harm educational achievement.
- 4) Connecticut's teachers and parents agree that there is too much testing, and it creates unnecessary stress and spreads anxiety among students as early as kindergarten. We should **prohibit high stakes testing before 3rd grade** (as done in New Jersey) and limit the amount of time that classroom instruction is diverted to testing (as done in New York State).
- 5) We should **reduce class size** in Alliance districts.
- 6) We should establish **caseload limits for special education** teachers that take into consideration the intensity of service that children need.
- 7) We should **identify a dedicated funding stream** to continually provide resources to school districts to address student trauma as done in Oregon where more than \$200 million per year is targeted toward resources like mental health professionals, support staff, and other critical resources districts need to address this critical issue.

There are other recommendations in our proposed legislation. All our recommendations focus on preventive measures or nonpunitive remedies — not after-the-fact disciplinary actions.

CEA welcomes all members of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus to ask questions about your concerns with our proposed legislation. We thank you for the time you spend on this committee helping to make Connecticut a better place to live for all its residents.