



Connecticut Education Association
Capitol Place, Suite 500
21 Oak Street, Hartford, CT 06106
860-525-5641 • 800-842-4316 • www.cea.org
An affiliate of the National Education Association

Policy, Research, & Government Relations
Ray Rossomando, Director
Capitol Place, Suite 500
21 Oak Street
Hartford, CT 06106
(860) 525-5641, 800-842-4316

Governance
Jeff Leake • President
Thomas Nicholas • Vice President
Stephanie Wanzer • Secretary
David Jedidian • Treasurer

Executive Director
Donald E. Williams Jr.

Testimony of
Orlando Rodriguez
Connecticut Education Association
Before the
Education Committee
March 9, 2020
Re:

**SB 310 AN ACT CONCERNING FUNDING FOR AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
EDUCATION CENTERS**

SB 392 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A PERSONAL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT PILOT PROGRAM

**HB 394: AA CONCERNING AUTHORIZATION OF STATE GRANT COMMITMENTS FOR SCHOOL
BUILDING PROJECTS AND REVISIONS TO THE SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECTS STATUTES**

**HB 5433: AA CONCERNING THE CREATION OF A SPECIAL EDUCATION EXCESS COST
COOPERATIVE**

**HB 5434 AN ACT CONCERNING THE TREASURER'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INCLUSION
OF FINANCIAL LITERACY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

**5436 AN ACT PROHIBITING SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES THAT DISCRIMINATE AGAINST
STUDENTS BASED ON NATURAL HAIR AND HAIRSTYLES**

**HB 5438 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A WORKING GROUP TO EXAMINE WAYS TO CONSOLIDATE OR
ELIMINATE CERTAIN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IN-SERVICE TRAINING
REQUIREMENTS FOR EDUCATORS**

**H.B. No. 5439 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING VARIOUS REVISIONS AND ADDITIONS TO THE
EDUCATION STATUTES.**

Good afternoon, Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee. 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 who inform our legislative priorities.

SB 310 – CEA supports proposed funding increases, but does not support the bill as written

CEA supports the purpose of our agricultural science and technology centers and supports increasing their per-pupil grant. However, we do not support legislation decreasing education cost sharing (ECS) grants paid to sending districts. When one student leaves a school to attend another school, there is no corresponding reduction in costs. ECS funds should continue to be paid.

CEA supports SB 392 and HB 5434

There is an inherent inequity in the financial literacy of our young adults that creates disparities in their future financial health. We commend Treasurer Wooden and Co-Chairs McCrory and Sanchez for bringing this important issue to the forefront. CEA supports the inclusion of financial literacy in public school curricula.

CEA supports SB 394 and recommends enhancements to remedy “sick school buildings”

CEA supports SB 394. The school building projects in HB 394 should be funded as requested. Also, we ask for additional language to fund improvements to indoor air quality in our schools. Across the state, existing school facilities require remediation of mold and other toxic particles in indoor air.

In the Public Health Committee today, a bill is being heard that specifically addresses sick school buildings: [HB 5431: AAC Indoor Air Quality in Schools](#). What we seek in this bill would complement efforts to improve the conditions of schools for learning. Funding for critical cleanups of existing school facilities may be harder to support versus shiny new school buildings, but the remediations are no less important. There would be no increase in the state budget if school construction funding remained at the current level and some of the millions of dollars in school construction funding were set aside specifically for remediation of indoor air.

We also ask this committee to close two loopholes in current statutes that create unnecessary barriers to school districts getting state funds to remediate mold when it is an emergency — as is the case in Stamford. First, [C.G.S. § 10-283\(b\)\(1\)](#) provides funding “... to remedy a certified school indoor air quality emergency...”; however, the Commissioner of the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) can deny this funding. We ask that the statute be changed so that all applications for emergency funds “shall” be approved, if they meet existing guidelines. Currently, the statute states that funds “may” be approved. As a result, a few years ago, critically needed remediation was denied. Second, [C.G.S. § 10-283\(b\)\(2\)](#) requires that a school district inform DAS within seven days of their discovering an emergency situation; otherwise, the district will not be able to obtain emergency funding. This is unnecessarily restrictive, given that many districts are not aware emergency funding is available to them.

This committee has a unique opportunity to remedy harmful indoor air conditions in schools across Connecticut without increasing taxes. We simply ask that some of the monies already set aside for new school construction be repurposed to clean the bad indoor air currently harming our students and teachers. Apart from their homes, children spend more time in schools than anywhere else.

CEA opposes HB 5433

The proposal in HB 5433 needlessly outsources State Department of Education (SDE) functions to a non-governmental entity and earmarks 1% of what could be in excess of \$500 million of operating funds for administering the entity. We believe that this is a bad precedent to set and that SDE could carry out the same functions at a lower cost to taxpayers. Additionally, the bill specifically exempts the proposed entity from Freedom of Information laws. This is another bad precedent to set.

The 2017 legislative session created a Special Education Cost Model Task Force to study alternative methods for funding special education (SPED). We believe that the proposal ignores the findings of the task force and further neglects to address key cost drivers in special education.

CEA opposed the 2017 bill, and this bill, because we believe that finding an effective solution requires first identifying what is driving cost increases even when K-12 enrollment is declining dramatically. For every three-student decline in enrollment, one new student is identified for SPED. At this rate, by the 2029-2030 school year, 1 in 5 students will be identified for SPED.

Overidentification of English learners for SPED is well known. Separately, the Connecticut State Department of Education reported in *Condition of Education 2016-2017* that there is overidentification in some categories of primary disability. New findings from a national research study released in 2017 found that minorities are *underidentified*. Furthermore, not all school districts are using legal contracts for private-sector SPED, as is now required by law. Lastly, the Connecticut Auditors of Public Accounts has identified steps that can be taken now to reduce the cost of SPED services, but they have not been seriously considered.

It is not surprising that the Special Education Cost Model Task Force did not make any recommendations for an alternative method for funding SPED. Their report states, “... *special education is a complex, multifaceted topic*” and lists several issues to resolve before an alternative funding mechanism is adopted. CEA agrees wholeheartedly and asks this committee to instead create a task force to identify the underlying factors driving the increasing costs of SPED—a task force like that in SB 390 that will study educator retention and sustainability in Connecticut.

CEA supports 5436

CEA believes in freedom of expression in our schools and supports this legislation prohibiting discrimination of students based on hairstyles.

CEA supports HB 5438

CEA strongly supports HB 5438, which would create a working group to streamline state professional development requirements. While all of the requirements are important, many are redundant and others not applicable to all educators or necessary to be offered every year. The sheer number of requirements also makes it impossible for schools to focus deeply on the topics of greatest relevance to teaching and learning in their district.

CEA had the pleasure of serving on the last statewide professional development task force in 2016, a stakeholder group that worked collaboratively to reduce the overall number of requirements. Unfortunately, since that time, even more professional development requirements have been added back into statute. Convening a work group consisting of the major stakeholders can build on the foundation created by the 2016 task force, resulting in greater flexibility for district professional development and evaluation committees, more meaningful professional learning opportunities for educators, and enriched educational experiences for children.

HB 5439 – CEA supports some and opposes other provisions of the bill

CEA does not support Section 1 regarding qualifications of substitute teachers as written. We appreciate that high standards for substitute teachers have been set, but these standards may inhibit districts’ ability to apply for waivers that would enable them to employ as many substitute teachers as necessary to fill positions. Substitutes are already paid a relatively low per-diem amount, which varies per district, and are difficult to come by. We would encourage this committee to amend the bill to continue to allow districts to apply for the waiver if needed.

We support Section 4 of this bill, which seeks to reinstate kindergarten to the elementary certification endorsement that currently covers only grades 1-6. The exclusion of kindergarten from this endorsement has made staffing decisions unnecessarily cumbersome for districts since it went into effect, and we believe that this change will provide needed flexibility.

We support Sections 6-8 of this bill, which include changing the name of the Paraprofessional Advisory Council to the Paraeducator Advisory Council, a study to examine paraeducator pay and benefits—among other issues—and the inclusion of paraeducators in voluntary professional development and in-service training. Paraeducators are vital to our students' success and the functionality of schools, and they deserve a voice at the school, district, and state levels.

We support Section 11 of this bill, which extends the deadline for the CARES Commission, which is charged with reviewing state funding and related resources for funding students' opportunities to succeed. With the challenges the state faces in ensuring sufficient funding to address student trauma and promote social-emotional learning, the CARES Commission could be well poised to help Connecticut follow the path of states like Oregon, which passed landmark legislation funding critical services that all students need, and especially those who have endured traumatic experiences.

We thank you for the time you spend on this committee helping to make Connecticut a better place to live for all its residents.