

Testimony of Donald E. Williams, Jr.
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Before the Education Committee

Re: House Bill 5378, *An Act Concerning the Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in Programs Of Professional Development For Educators In Connecticut*

March 9, 2020

The limited provisions of HB 5378, *An Act Concerning the Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in Programs of Professional Development for Educators in Connecticut*, may be well intentioned, but they are woefully inadequate.

First, it should be acknowledged that most teachers and administrators are aware of social-emotional learning (SEL) needs and priorities, and many districts have implemented programs to not only heighten awareness but also provide new strategies to assist students. Consequently, the provisions of this legislation, which simply require that SEL be incorporated in a school's goals and professional development, have already been achieved at many schools.

The real challenge is to provide real resources to address the needs of students. New, empty mandates are no substitute for the staff and dollars that many schools lack to appropriately address social-emotional learning and trauma-informed instruction.

There is a deficit of school social workers, counselors, and psychologists. There are few dollars to provide the sustained, quality services that are necessary for student mental health and well-being. There is not enough infrastructure for the necessary outreach to families and inclusion of families in solutions for students.

There is an understandable fear of proposing new legislation with any fiscal impact. Yet when it comes to the emotional and mental health of children—which we know greatly impacts their ability to learn, to work cooperatively with other students, and to succeed in school—there is no substitute for meaningful resources that can actually get the job done.

“We all have different triggers of stress throughout our life and different emotions that can hijack our body's ability to be able to process the world meaningfully,” said Christina Cipriano, director of research at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. “If we're not able to regulate or down-regulate in a given situation, we're not able to be available to process the information of what we're being taught. So, regardless of how fantastic your teacher may be, or how incredible that science curriculum is at engaging and motivating you, if you have a student who's dealing with stress or trauma or unable to kind of get over the interpersonal interaction they had right before they entered that classroom... they're not going to be able to process the dynamic curriculum that's being presented to them. And so social-emotional learning really teaches and targets those skill sets and competencies that underscore your availability to learn.”

The Connecticut Education Association presented draft legislation to the chairmen of the Education Committee at the beginning of the session that provides real resources for students. It costs money. We strongly suggest that this legislation, which has the potential to be a force for positive change, be replaced by that draft legislation so that we can move forward to meaningfully address the critical needs of an increasing number of students.

Thank you.