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Testimony of

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Before the Education Committee

Re: HB 5378 An Act Concerning Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in Programs of Professional Development for Educators in Connecticut

March 9, 2020

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, and 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 and a former public school teacher and school administrator. CEA is Connecticut's largest teachers' union, representing active, retired, and aspiring educators across the state.

Thank you for reading my testimony today regarding HB 5378, AAC The Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in Programs of Professional Development for Educators in Connecticut. While CEA strongly supports the integration of emotional learning (SEL) at all grade levels, and quality SEL professional development (PD) for educators, we firmly believe it is necessary to approach the SEL needs of children holistically and comprehensively. Solely addressing such needs through professional development is not nearly sufficient.

CEA is a strong and early supporter of the integration of SEL into Connecticut's schools. CEA has been a leading provider of SEL workshops in Connecticut for over five years. We have delivered SEL related workshops in over sixty different schools and districts around the state, offering teachers practical SEL and trauma sensitive strategies to enhance the social emotional wellbeing of the children in their care. CEA is working on several important initiatives related to SEL in collaboration with the Yale Center for Social Emotional Learning, and is also a member of the SEL Collaborative, a stakeholder group currently exploring how to develop a comprehensive plan to systematically address the social emotional needs of the whole child. Mandating PD before the stakeholder group has a chance to complete their plan risks compromising the effort before it has been fully developed.

Providing professional development to teachers before implementing policies that mitigate the underlying obstacles to SEL could actually contribute to student stress and anxiety and will not work. Additionally, Marc Brackett, Director of the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence, urges districts to first require extensive professional development for all its administrators before requiring it of all teachers. Administrators are the individuals responsible for implementing and supporting SEL policies and are integral to supporting the work of teachers. Professional development is necessary, but currently teachers have little autonomy to adjust the pace of the

required curriculum, embed SEL into the curriculum, or limit the amount of testing or direct instruction experienced by children. This must change if SEL strategies are to have the desired impact.

CEA proposes the following systemic changes that will create a safe and compassionate space for social emotional learning to take root and flourish in Connecticut's schools:

Kindergarten Start Age: Connecticut has the youngest start age in the country. Children should be cognitively, psychologically, and emotionally ready to start school, which is more likely for children who are five years old by September 1, rather than January 1 as is in our law. Changing the date would ensure Connecticut's start age is consistent with the other 49 states and ensure students are ready for the physical, social, and educational challenges of Kindergarten. It is also important to recognize that Kindergarten and early grades have become more academically rigorous due to the implementation of the early childhood Common Core standards, which are inappropriate for children as young as four. Students in the early grades are also subject to repeated standardized tests, longer school days, less play-time, and more direct instruction to meet these standards. This causes many young children intense frustration, resulting in stress and anxiety. This manifests in outbursts as young children are not equipped with language to explain their frustration or strategies and coping skills for emotional regulation. Connecticut's children are missing out on childhood.

Universal Preschool: Connecticut must find a way to ensure all children begin school on a more equal footing and beginning kindergarten prematurely is counterproductive. CEA proposes the SDE and Office of Early Childhood develop a plan for universal preschool and report its findings and recommendations for implementation to the legislature (an act requiring this in 2017 was never satisfactorily fulfilled). Students who are not old enough or developmentally advanced enough to attend kindergarten would benefit from a universal preschool program. Developmentally appropriate, play-based preschool opportunities can help better prepare students for social, emotional, and academic life in school. Implementing universal pre-school will not be simple or inexpensive, but the impact would provide a long-term cost savings to the state and would help address the impact of trauma on students.

Acceptable Counselor, Social Worker, and School Psychologist Staff Ratios: Ratios of social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors in Connecticut's schools should meet national standards. For social workers and school counselors, the student to teacher standard is 250:1; for school psychologists, it's 500-700:1. Currently, there is a disconnect between what students need and the resources available to address their needs. Many schools do not have ready access to student support personnel like social workers, guidance counselors, or school psychologists. In fact, underscoring the disconnect in resources is the fact that many schools have a police-like presence with School Resource Officers, but no student support personnel critical to helping schools address student trauma and preventing incidents that stem from it.

Reduce Testing: Standardized testing is required by federal law in grades 3-8, and once in high school. High stakes and school accountability pressures forced schools to focus on test scores and many now require students in kindergarten through grade 2 to be tested. The effects of over testing are numerous:

- In the early grades, tests can be developmentally inappropriate causing stress and anxiety. This shift to testing and academics means less time for social-emotional and executive function development through play, creativity, problem solving, and

collaboration, resulting in greater difficulty in a child's ability to regulate emotions and decisions.

- For our youngest learners – those who start kindergarten too early – the effects of stress and anxiety grows with them.
- Time spent on standardized testing is focused on math and reading. This means less time for students to focus on strengths in other subjects where some students could better thrive and grow. The curriculum narrows to focus predominantly on math and literacy at the expense of play, art, music, history, and science. This results in stress, anxiety, and alienation that can ultimately stimulate anger and rage in classrooms, especially when coupled with the underlying effects of trauma.

Other states have begun to recognize that standardized testing is cognitively inappropriate for most of our youngest learners and extraordinarily stressful for many. Testing should be prohibited from pre-kindergarten through second grade, as was done in New Jersey.

Revise the Common Core for Grades K-2: To create time and space in the curriculum for SEL to flourish in the lower grades, the Common Core Standards for K-2 must be revised to include SEL standards, play-based learning, and cognitively appropriate standards. The increased academic rigor in the tested subject areas of math and reading has increased student stress, resulted in less play, and reduced time spent on subjects and classroom activities that promote creativity, problem-solving skills, and social and emotional growth. The state's common core standards exacerbate this by neglecting to incorporate social and emotional development into the curriculum and by pushing academic studies into grades where it is not developmentally appropriate. These factors contribute to children's difficulty regulating their emotions, which can then erupt into negative classroom behaviors that disrupt the learning environment for all students. The SDE could be charged with developing a model SEL curriculum to help districts integrate SEL at a low-cost.

Children in Connecticut and across the United States are in crisis. One quarter of our nation's adolescents have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Thirty percent of children experience problems so severe they require regular counseling, and that number doubles in urban areas. Incidents of bullying and aggressive student behavior are far more prevalent, particularly in the early grades where such behavior has historically been rare. Many of the factors contributing to these problems are beyond the control of educators, which takes an emotional toll on teachers who struggle to help their students, despite limited resources and support at their disposal. Solving this crisis will take more than an hour of professional development squeezed in among all the other professional development requirements teachers must meet in a year. It will take a more comprehensive response that includes the proposals addressed above, and additional ones proposed in CEA's Safe and Compassionate Learning Initiative.

We thank the committee for raising this critical issue and urge members to think big and act boldly; our children need and deserve it.