

Testimony of

Jeff Leake

Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

*Re: Raised Bill No. 173 AA Concerning the Development of a Framework for Assessing
the Provision of Public Education in Connecticut*

March 6, 2020

Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and members of the Education Committee, my name is Jeff Leake and I serve as the president of the Connecticut Education Association. CEA helps active and retired teachers across the state advocate for students, teachers, and public schools.

CEA supports the concept raised in SB 173. We also believe that it is time for Connecticut to revisit what it determines as important for schools to focus on to provide high quality public education. We believe that SB 173, with a few enhancements, could provide that opportunity.

Connecticut should take this opportunity to revisit how it measures what it expects students to be able to learn and do. It should use this opportunity to increase equity by embracing all skills and subjects where students can excel and show success, rather than alienate students who do not necessarily shine on standardized math or language tests.

With recent changes to federal law through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Connecticut is presented the opportunity to once again be on the forefront of educational innovation. ESSA departs from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) by allowing schools to build flexible accountability systems that don't rely on the high-stakes testing focus that dominated federal and state law after 2002. SB 173 could be enhanced by making a clearer connection to ESSA in its charge.

The flexibility in ESSA would permit Connecticut to refocus on curricula, such as the arts, music, civics, and science that have been downplayed under the era of NCLB, which narrowed curricula to math and language arts through high-stakes testing. It would enable the state to better focus on issues of school climate and the promotion of social and emotional skills and executive function. ESSA flexibility would also permit states to better promote students' ability to think critically, show creativity, practice collaboration, and build stronger communication skills – all of which are critical ingredients for high school graduates to succeed in their future careers or college paths.

Furthermore, while the development of an assessment framework, in collaboration with stakeholder groups, is necessary to help determine the effectiveness of policies and programs designed to address achievement gaps among socio-economic and racial sub groups, it is also essential that such a framework be broader than what is currently described in SB 173.

Achievement gaps exist not only among racial and socio-economic groups but are also increasingly common between males and females. Many districts are unaware that males are significantly underperforming females in school at every grade level (including college and graduate school) regardless of race or socioeconomic class, although males of color are of greatest concern. It is critical that any framework developed include metrics that would help illuminate this silent crisis.

Additionally, we suggest that the assessment framework proposed in SB 173 more specifically include other important outcomes of public education – those beyond academic achievement measured in the snapshots in time that are standardized tests. Many crucial factors that contribute to a student’s academic success should also be required. These would include: social-emotional wellbeing, attendance rates, and other indicators of student engagement (such as opportunities for project based learning or involvement in extracurricular activities, etc.), and the effectiveness not merely of teachers, but of school and district leaders as well in promoting positive, culturally-competent school climates. The efficacy of school and district leaders in developing, implementing, and supporting policies that promote equity and excellence for all students should be quantified and included in the framework calculation as a separate metric, as without strong leadership and guidance, school districts are unlikely to make meaningful progress.

Thank you.