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Testimony of
Brendan Murphy
Connecticut Education Association
Before the Education Committee
Raised Bill No. 5378

***Re: AAC The 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, Representative McCarty, and distinguished members of the Education Committee.

My name is Brendan Murphy, and I am a union representative for the Connecticut Education Association. I am currently an organizer/trainer representing 33 local associations in four counties. Prior to my past five years with CEA, I was a high school and middle school special education teacher and department chair.

While the Education Committee's social-emotional learning proposals are important pieces, they are not enough. What is truly necessary is a comprehensive approach to address student trauma and promote social-emotional learning. A comprehensive approach would include smaller class sizes in Alliance districts and limits on the number of students special education teachers have on their caseloads.

As a former special educator who co-taught in regular education classes, I know that connecting with students is key to promoting learning. For students who have experienced trauma, connecting with a caring adult is critical to managing their post-traumatic world. Large class sizes simply make building relationships with students more difficult for teachers. Large classes make schools less personable and feed student alienation, which in turn increases the risk of negative classroom incidents. The number of students a teacher has in his/her class matters. In a time when teachers are expected to differentiate based on student needs and are asked to individualize as much as possible, the larger the class, the more impossible this task becomes. These statewide initiatives of differentiation and individualization can only be accomplished by teachers when they have fewer students in their classroom. All we need to do is look to the world leader in education, Finland, and follow their lead. Finland made a conscious decision in the 1970s to reduce class sizes, and they have been seeing better results for their students because of that decision.

The second point that I wanted to make is that as a former special education teacher and a former secondary special education department chair, I was often faced with more intensive services for more students. As a result, special education students can experience services that are less attentive. All classroom teachers experience the impact of increasing special education teacher caseloads, as access to inclusionary supports can be strained, and students whose services have not received the attention they need cry out in sometimes aggressive ways. If you think of this in the simplest terms, if I have 12 students on my caseload, I am able to provide them services and give them a certain amount of attention. If the following year I am given 22 students on my caseload, there is no way I could possibly give those 22 students the same level of services or attention that I gave to the 12 students in the previous year. I speak to you on this based on my experience; this has actually happened to me.

At CEA we have recently compiled a committee of special educators from across the state who represent service providers from pre-K through students age 21. This group is tasked with creating reasonable limits that take into consideration intensities of various services, the amount of time students' IEPs indicate as classroom inclusionary time, and other key factors. Over the past five years with CEA, I have been lucky enough to work in over 45 districts, and I can say all of these districts would have welcomed guidelines from the SDE concerning caseload limits.

As special education budgets are cut and special education teachers' caseloads continue to rise, students' learning conditions continue to deteriorate, causing students to endure trauma without the supports or amount of attention from a caring adult that they need. Student class sizes need to be kept small, and special education teachers' student caseloads need to be limited. Please consider these two key factors that impact students' social-emotional learning.

I urge you to broaden the scope of your bill in order to address student trauma and get to the root of the social-emotional learning deficiencies that we are all faced with today.