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Testimony of

Kate Field, Ed.D.

Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

Re:

HB 6557 AAC Social and Emotional Learning

HB 6556 AAA Issues Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Education in Connecticut

March 8, 2021

Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, my name is Kate Field, and I am the Teacher Development Specialist at Connecticut Education Association, an organization that advocates for teachers and public education. As a specialist in teacher evaluation and professional learning, my testimony today focusses primarily on those two areas. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of H.B. 6557 AN ACT CONCERNING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING, albeit with minor changes and clarifications.

Schools face great challenges in the coming years as the impact of the pandemic on children's academic and social emotional wellbeing becomes clear. Children were already facing a mental health crisis prior to the pandemic, a crisis that can only have been exacerbated by COVID. Schools will need more counselors, resources, and training to address this national emergency. They will also need the freedom to safely innovate and time to develop the skills needed to meet the challenges we are only now beginning to understand.

CEA strongly supports the provisions of HB 6557 related to SEL, performance evaluation, and professional development that:

- Call for the creation of SEL standards for grades 4-12:
CEA supports the development of common SEL standards for grades 4-12. Common standards will help create a shared SEL vision and a common vocabulary across Connecticut, allowing for greater collaboration across different schools and districts. Including educator representation in the development of these standards, however, is critical and a necessary amendment to this bill.
- Add SEL to a school's accountability index:
While SEL is inherently difficult to measure, CEA supports *permitting* schools to utilize a non-cognitive indicator like school climate or SEL. Doing so will help broaden our perspective on student growth. Rather than focus myopically on math and literacy, the inclusion of SEL as an accountability measure encourages us to move beyond test scores

and broaden our lens to include the whole child. It is important, however, to ensure each district Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC) has the autonomy to select their own accountability indicators in order to ensure alignment between the district's unique goals. (If school connectedness is a district goal, for example, involvement in extracurricular activities and school attendance make logical district accountability indicators.)

- Include SEL as a component in student success plans:
This measure would further expand our definition of student success and promote a holistic approach to meeting the needs of the whole child.
- Require inclusion of SEL in educator performance evaluation:
CEA supports the *optional* inclusion of SEL in performance evaluation plans, but not the requirement to do so. Districts across the state are in vastly different stages of SEL work. Some are advanced and others have only just begun. It is important to allow district PDECs the autonomy to decide whether the time is right to include SEL in their performance evaluation plan or if there is more work that needs to be done before this is possible.

It is also vitally important that if SEL is going to be included in the evaluation and support process, it is done so with a focus on encouraging teachers to learn, develop, and implement strategies that can enhance SEL. This is best accomplished by focusing on the strategies, while resisting the use of SEL measurement tests or indicators.

- Decrease the emphasis on academic indicators in educator performance evaluation:
CEA wholeheartedly supports reducing the emphasis on standardized test scores in educator performance evaluation plans. This step will give educators the time and space to thoughtfully integrate SEL throughout the day, rather than remain regimented by pacing guides designed to prepare students for the next round of tests. Such a change may also free up more time for children to engage in developmental play, creative problem-solving, and hands-on learning experiences.
- Call for collaboration with bargaining unit representatives to create sample SEL learning goals:
Including the voice of teachers in the development of model learning goals is crucial because every district is different and in a different phase of SEL integration. Including the teacher perspective will ensure the samples are a useful and practical resource for PDECs.
- Require school resource officers to receive the same SEL training as teachers:
CEA supports SEL training for SRO officers but urges this requirement to be expanded to include all employees in the district.
- Integrate SEL and restorative practices into the professional development requirements for educators:

While CEA supports professional development in SEL and restorative practices, this bill fails to provide any flexibility from existing requirements, leaving little to no time in the calendar to ensure the SEL requirement is implemented well. Before adding any new PD mandates, the existing requirements should be streamlined to create the necessary space for ongoing, high quality professional learning in SEL and restorative practices.

HB 6557 lays the foundation for the safe space schools need to explore innovative ways to support students' SEL needs. The pandemic cast a spotlight on the gross inequities that weaken our educational system. The old way of doing things didn't work well before the pandemic and certainly won't work any better now. The overemphasis on testing, implicit bias, curriculum pacing guides, developmentally inappropriate academic standards in the early grades, reduced recess and play-time, more homework, and a punitive educator evaluation system has made schools more stressful, less joyful places to learn and work. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to reimagine what school can be, and CEA commends the sponsors of this bill for taking steps toward creating the space needed to try something new.

HB 6556 An Act Addressing Issues Created by the COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Education in Connecticut

CEA supports some provisions of HB 6556 and opposes others.

Section 1 – CEA does not support the overreliance on statewide mastery exams as measures of what students know and can do. Statewide mastery exams, which primarily consist of the SBAC test, can be biased and the results come months too late to be useful in terms of adjusting instruction and remediating skill gaps.

CEA strongly suggests that committee members consider more innovative and effective ways of determining learning needs and the engagement of students. District level assessments and diagnostic tools that are widely used in districts can pinpoint with greater accuracy and timeliness the academic needs of students. We ask that the bill be amended to enable school districts to use tools of their choosing to identify needs, and to develop mitigation and engagement strategies that best meet those needs.

Section 1 recommends strategies such as tutoring, small group engagement, and enrichment programs. We believe these strategies to be promising. However, the section also recommends “summer academic instruction,” which leaves us concerned that once again, the state will focus on the context of tested subjects at the expense of building the learning, communication, and social and emotional skills necessary for success. It is time to leave the debunked test-centric focus of No Child Left Behind, behind.

Section 1 also makes reference to “Learning Pods.” A learning pod is essentially a small group of students and parents who share in the process of schooling outside of their public school. In some states, learning pods are evolving into state-funded home schools, with many reports of fiscal abuse and fraud. CEA is very concerned about the evolution of this concept from study groups during COVID-19 to a more permanent practice of de-schooling that is ripe for abuse.

CEA supports section 2, which excludes the use of multiple indicators of academic growth in the teacher evaluation system from 2020 to 2022. Measures of academic growth are fraught with bias and inaccuracies that distort the value of good teaching. Additionally, the overreliance on such indicators has

resulted in schools focusing too much on testing and not enough on the skills and environment that make learning stronger. CEA believes indicators of academic growth should be suspended indefinitely to better enable the state's teacher evaluation system to focus on the conditions and strategies that promote learning and innovation, rather than distorted and biased outcome measures that reward privilege and test-taking ability.

Sections 3 through 5 expand the provision of summer programs as a strategy for addressing student needs after the pandemic. CEA supports this conceptually and has proposed an expansion of summer programs, with a focus on enrichment, social interaction, and recreational activities to ensure students' wellness, mindfulness, and emotional well-being receive the attention they have so desperately lost. As noted above, we are concerned that the language of the bill, in this case regarding summer programs, will perpetuate a narrow over-focus on performance in mastery exam subjects at the expense of student well-being.

We ask committee members to amend the language to de-emphasize performance on tested subjects to better ensure that strong summer enrichment programs can help students reengage, reconnect, rebuild, and grow their ability to learn.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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