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Testimony of

Jeff Leake

Connecticut Education Association

Before the

Judiciary Committee

Re:

**HB 6667 AAC THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY
AND OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE**

March 31, 2021

Good evening Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Jeff Leake and I serve as the President for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA). CEA represents tens of thousands of educators across Connecticut.

We applaud Judiciary Committee members for addressing injustice in the juvenile justice system. As an organization representing teachers in over 150 school districts, we understand the need and the challenges of creating systems for Connecticut's school age children---that move away from a disciplinary frame to a more responsive, restorative, and trauma-sensitive one.

CEA believes the situations and behaviors that result in student suspensions and expulsions, from our youngest learners to our oldest, stem from adverse experiences that have gone unaddressed. The adversity that appears as despondency and disengagement for some, and violent student outbursts for others, are cries for help. When students disengage, trauma can be left unaddressed, the effects of which accumulate and become more severe and difficult to counteract.

The fundamental challenge for the state is to address the paucity of resources available to help educators respond to cries for help. Currently, there are little to no resources going toward preventing the seeds of adversity from growing into more severe behaviors that ultimately feed the school to prison pipeline.

Every school day, our educators observe and experience our collective failure to address this fundamental challenge. Social workers, counselors, advocates, and community leaders observe and experience it too. In 2019, a large group of stakeholders, led by the State Department of Education, including CEA and many other educators and education support groups, sought to address these challenges in legislation, which resulted in the Education Committee's JFs HB

7110, An Act Concerning Resources To Assist School Districts In Improving School Climate. HB 7110 would have provided educators with more say in directing resources to children who cried out for help. Unfortunately, the bill died when its key provisions were stripped in the Appropriations Committee because funding was not made available.

The key goals of this bill included a greater role for educators to advocate for interventions and resources. It included the identification and provision of proactive strategies to lessen negative behaviors, enhance resiliency, and improve social and peer relations skills. Suggestions included therapeutic support; restorative practices with additional educator training, protocols, and support by the Department of Education; trauma-informed instruction; and strategies to improve the school climate for teaching and learning. It also sought to ensure students would have access to appropriate professional staff, therapeutic resources, instructional materials, and technology to ensure the continuity of learning.

The bill also called for a statewide school climate survey to assess each school's learning environment, academic supports and resources, school safety, parental outreach, and specific assessments on whether the school was welcoming for all races and ethnicities. The annual survey would also determine the availability of resources, supports, professional development, collaborative planning time, and strategies for the development and retention of educators, especially teachers and administrators of color.

As Judiciary Committee members consider policies to address student suspensions and expulsions, we urge you to seek funding to provide supportive resources and to address the root causes of behaviors that have traditionally resulted in disparate student discipline.

Thank you.