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Testimony of

Katherine Field

Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

RE:

**Governor's Bill No. 874
Sec. 13-16 (Social Emotional Learning)**

March 1, 2019

Good afternoon members of the Education Committee; my name is Kate Field and I am the Teacher Development Specialist at the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) and a former teacher and school administrator. I am testifying here today on Sections 13-16 of the Governor's Bill No. 874, which call for professional development for educators on the topic of social emotional learning. While CEA strongly supports social emotional learning in schools, a professional development mandate without additional supports may be premature.

In my role as Teacher Development Specialist at CEA, I facilitate several different social emotional learning (SEL) workshops for educators. I also sit on the state's SEL Task Force, which explores how best to embed SEL into the culture of Connecticut's schools. I recently also joined the Social Emotional Learning Council hosted by CREC.

Integrating SEL into Connecticut's schools is a top priority at CEA. Our Professional Learning Academy offers a wealth of professional development programs, including many SEL offerings. One of our workshops, "Fostering Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom," has been presented at no cost in over 30 districts and at several state-wide conferences, attended by well over 1,000 educators over the past two years. We also offer workshops on trauma sensitive approaches, restorative practices, and fostering empathy in the classroom. Of our many professional learning options, these have been among the most popular with our members, who recognize better than anyone the crisis that now faces our state and our country.

Childhood anxiety, stress, aggressive behavior, and trauma are approaching epidemic proportions. Teachers desperately want to learn how to address these problems most effectively. They love their students and want to help them. While providing meaningful professional development on SEL is clearly something I wholeheartedly support, mandating it without first looking at the issue holistically may not be the best approach to ensuring long-term success.

CEA was part of the professional development task force that made a series of recommendations two years ago to streamline professional development and in-service training for teachers. We were able to eliminate some redundancies, but there remains much work to be done before additional requirements are added. As a former administrator, I understand there are simply not enough hours or enough money to implement all unfunded statutory professional development and in-service requirements with fidelity.

For social emotional learning to have a meaningful impact on students and families, it must be implemented strategically. There should first be a plan in place, and everyone from the school custodian

to the superintendent should have a role to play. Administrators should be trained first and then teachers and other school personnel, thus ensuring teachers have strong support and guidance, not only from their peers and mentors, as called for in the bill, but from school and district leaders as well. Families should be included and community partnerships forged. To quote Dr. Marc Brackett, Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, “Buy-in for SEL must reach all the way to the top—including superintendents and school boards—or implementation will become uneven,” He goes on to write, “When learning about emotions and how to manage them pervades a school—classrooms, lunchrooms, hallways, offices—the entire school community can be transformed” (Brackett, 2018). Teachers cannot transform school culture singlehandedly; the whole district, indeed the whole community, is essential to ensuring long-term success.

Lastly, evaluating teacher performance in implementing SEL strategies is highly problematic for several reasons. The educator performance evaluation system in Connecticut is already overly complicated and burdensome. Any change to this system should first be discussed and mutually agreed upon by the Performance and Evaluation Advisory Committee (PEAC) to ensure all stakeholders have a voice in the process and an opportunity to shape the outcome. Quantifying SEL and incorporating it into an existing performance evaluation matrix is fraught with reliability concerns and risks sabotaging the effort by placing sole responsibility for its success on teachers, rather than making it one metric by which the whole district, including administrators, are held accountable.

CEA does not oppose a SEL professional development requirement in the future, provided it is required of administrators to ensure school-wide implementation fidelity. But at this point, before any other supports have been implemented, the requirement is premature and unlikely to have much impact. To ensure success, Connecticut should first develop and implement a holistic plan aligned with CASEL’s K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards.¹ Adopting a statewide school climate survey aligned with national standards would also prove useful in quantifying the impact of SEL initiatives. These efforts would result in more consistency across districts and ensure all students have the tools they need to overcome trauma, anxiety, and stress—skills needed for a lifetime, but also a prerequisite for academic success.

Source:

Brackett, M.A. (2018). “The Emotional Intelligence We Owe Students and Educators,” *Educational Leadership*, 76/2 (12-18).

¹ For CASEL’s K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards visit <https://casel.org/in-the-district/standards/>