

Testimony of

Tom Nicholas

The Connecticut Education Association

Before the
Committee on Education

Re:

HB 6557 AN ACT CONCERNING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

March 8, 2021

Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, my name is Tom Nicholas, and I am a school social worker and Vice President of the Connecticut Education Association, an organization that advocates for teachers and public education. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 6557 An Act Concerning Social and Emotional Learning.

CEA is in support of sections 1-4 of HB 6557, which would provide \$10 million to increase mental health and emotional wellbeing support and resources in Connecticut's schools. There is a disconnect between what students need, recognition of those needs, and our ability and willingness to pay for those needs. Many schools do not have ready access to student support personnel like social workers, counselors, or school psychologists. Such support staff are critical to helping schools address student trauma and preventing incidents that stem from it. HB 6557 will begin to close this disconnect and make the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our children a top priority.

Connecticut must do more to ensure that the ratios of social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors meet national standards. For social workers and school counselors, the student to teacher standard should be 250:1; for school psychologists, it should be 500-700:1. We must also implement nationally recognized paraprofessional staffing ratios.

Additionally, districts should ensure that all students have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that provides academic, social-emotional, and post-secondary and career readiness programming by a certified school counselor with adequate training. And if we are to truly meet students' counseling needs, we must ensure that school counselors can focus on the work they are hired to do, providing school counseling services directly to individuals or groups of students, rather than being diverted to cover unrelated tasks.

The State Department of Education should make grants available to local school districts to assist in the hiring of additional mental health and social-emotional support staff. We support the collaboration in the bill that would make this happen.

We support the provision enabling the State Department of Education to also provide support and assistance to local and regional boards of education for mental health services, social-emotional support, behavioral support, trauma support, and special education programs and services. Such support and assistance should include, but need not be limited to, training and recruiting of mental health and social-emotional support staff and deploying them to school districts.

Collaborations that support student mental health and well-being, such as community school models, family resource centers, health clinics, and childcare that is available from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. year-round with use of school facilities, is crucial to developing comprehensive support strategies. A comprehensive community school strategy can efficiently and effectively meet the many needs of students by marshalling community resources and collaboration. We strongly endorse this model and are pleased to see it proposed in this legislation.

Programs must also provide model lessons relating to social-emotional learning, restorative practices, resiliency, and ways to ensure racial equity in schools. Educators will need high quality, sustained professional development as well as more flexibility from existing professional development mandates and evaluation guidelines in order to implement these programs with fidelity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 6557, which takes important steps toward ensuring that the wellbeing of children is our state's number one priority.