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An affiliate of the National Education Association

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Written Testimony of

Jeff Leake, President

Connecticut Education Association

Before the

Committee on Public Health

RE:

SB1 AN ACT EQUALIZING COMPREHENSIVE ACCESS TO MENTAL, BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC.

Good afternoon Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, Senator Somers, Senator Hwang, Representative Petit, and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee. My name is Jeff Leake and I serve as the President for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA).

I speak on behalf of our thousands of CEA members across Connecticut in support of Senate Bill 1, which would formally designate racism in Connecticut as a public health crisis and institute exit interviews for students who wish to leave school before graduating.

We believe that this bill is critically important as we have experienced an escalation of instances of racism in our country and state and are now one year into the worst pandemic of our lifetime. The time is now to address these crises and clearly time to take action as outlined in this bill.

We recognize the very disturbing incidents of racism and bias that have taken hold in communities across the country. We are deeply disturbed by the many instances that have occurred closer to home in Connecticut cities and towns. What had been unacceptable implicit bias has become more explicit, clearly exposing the historical racism that continues to sit in the underbelly of our communities.

Educators, like the vast majority of the families in the communities we serve, believe in the fundamental value of treating and respecting others as we want to be treated. We fear that it is this fundamental value that is under attack. Its impact on all people of color, children especially, has resulted in a crisis that educators see on a daily basis. They see it in the trauma

exhibited by students and in the inequities and biases that fuel the crisis. Its impact on all people, regardless of color, prevents our society from being all it can be. Everyone suffers.

The Connecticut Education Association, along with our affiliate, the National Education Association, have recognized the crisis of institutional racism and the damage it continues to impart on our society. For the state to formally designate racism as a public health crisis acknowledges the persistent injustices that have continued for centuries and enables institutions across the state to address the crisis comprehensively.

For our part, CEA has developed resources to help facilitate conversations about race, including classroom appropriate lesson plans, guides on how to have tough conversations with peers and students, implicit bias training available to school districts, and more. We stand ready as a partner in turning back the tide of racism.

CEA also supports the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to study the impact of racial disparities on public health. We commend the committee for including housing discrimination among the aspects to be studied. We see the impact of racism on student health, as well as the impact of racism on housing and ultimately the patterns that resulted in our highly segregated school districts with attendant disparities. As this bill moves toward final passage, we suggest that it include in the commission's study, the impact of racism on schooling. To that end, we offer participation of our organization and in particular our educators of color, in that discussion. We can also bring to that discussion the resources we have at our disposal through our national affiliate.

CEA also supports the institution of exit interviews for students who wish to leave school before graduating. For various reasons, from over-testing to under-resourcing, connections between schools, students, and their communities are not as they once were. We must do all we can to strengthen connections between educators and their students. This provision will help schools identify shortcomings and correct them on an ongoing basis. Ultimately, it helps school districts identify and provide the resources students may need to pursue their dreams and enjoy a productive life.

We are also in full support of the study proposed in Section 19 regarding the availability of affordable mental and behavioral health care services for children across the state. This is especially important as we acknowledge the increased need for these services and the mental health crisis among school children exacerbated by this terrible pandemic. CEA stands ready to share in this discussion and asks that our members be included in the work of the departments of Children and Families (DCF) and Public Health (DPH) to address the growing needs of our students.

Thank you.