

*Testimony of*

***Joslyn DeLancey***

***Connecticut Education Association***

*Before a joint meeting of the*

***Public Health Committee &  
Committee on Children***

***Re:***

***HB 5001 AAC CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH***

**SB 2 AN ACT EXPANDING PRESCHOOL AND MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN**

*February 25, 2022*

Members of the Children's and Public Health Committees, my name is Joslyn DeLancey and I serve as Vice President of the Connecticut Education Association (CEA). As an organization that represents educators in over 150 school districts across the state, CEA members see what many do not -- the effects of student trauma on children and classrooms every day. As an elementary classroom teacher who was in a general education classroom up until June of the 2020-2021 school year, I have seen these effects firsthand and can attest that the impacts of trauma touch children and classrooms in every district in the state regardless of DRG.

We support HB 5001 and SB 2 and believe that, through the legislative session, enhancements can be made to the comprehensive bills coming forward that can provide groundbreaking and much needed change in the way our public schools address student mental health. CEA members will be testifying on various aspects of this bill separately to be sure we provide educators' perspectives as fully as possible. Today I will focus on section 26 of the bill which addresses behavior interventions for students who cause "serious disruptions" to instruction, self-harm, or harm to others. I will also briefly address section 23 regarding school resource officers.

**CEA supports Section 26:** Connecticut, as well as many states across the country, is experiencing a crisis in education. This crisis is evident by a growing number of our youngest students who have experienced traumatic adverse childhood experiences.

What educators see is that unaddressed childhood trauma can result in student behaviors such as disengagement and withdrawal, and in dangerous aggression. Unfortunately, we see these behaviors in grades pre-k through 12. Our members see what most others don't. They see effects of childhood trauma in their classrooms, most disturbingly in the earliest grades. They see it in students' inability to regulate their stresses and emotions. They see it in aggressive, disruptive, and even violent outbursts that have been causing significant physical and emotional harm to those around them – students, teachers, and others in the school community.

The educational path for children whose needs do not go fully addressed can become increasingly difficult, leading to drop-out, self-harm, as well as risky and criminal behaviors. For teachers, the immediate impact can be physical harm from aggressive students resulting in lost time at work, scars, workers' compensation claims, and the secondary trauma on the students and teachers who frequently witness disruptive student behavior caused by trauma. The longer-term impact can be disillusion, frustration, and a diminishment of job satisfaction that ultimately makes teaching a less attractive profession.

I want to make it clear that CEA and educational professionals know that violent student outbursts are cries for help. Teachers desperately want to ensure that all students have the supports and care provided to them to address trauma and these negative behaviors, yet our educators do not have the support or resources to address the needs of students who, by no fault of their own, are experiencing trauma. There are insufficient resources to help respond to incidents, and there are little to no resources going to prevention. Additionally, schools do not implement potential solutions (such as trauma informed instruction, restorative practices, etc.) with consistency or fidelity. As a result, teachers are (often) left unsupported when a child cries out. Classrooms get cleared, learning for all students is disrupted, and the disruptive child receives little or no supports and cycles back into the classroom with their underlying condition left unaddressed.

Section 26 permits any teacher of record in a classroom to request the school's safe school climate specialist to convene a behavior intervention meeting for any student whose behavior has caused a serious disruption to the instruction of other students, self-harm, or physical harm to others in the classroom. It places the teacher of record, who is the most consistent caring adult of such child in the school, into the conversation about the resources that would best address the needs of a child in crisis.

Some may be surprised that this is not usually the case. But in many districts, there are no plans in place to ensure an appropriate, timely, and student-centered response to such disruptive incidents. And there is no process for teachers to advocate for resources to prevent future incidents. This problem has persisted because districts either did not have sufficient resources or failed to effectively allocate them toward addressing or preventing such incidents.

**CEA supports Section 23 with reservation:** Section 23 requires school resources officers (SROs) to be trained peer-to-peer mental health support. We support such training for SROs and further suggest that they be required to successfully complete formal Mental Health First Aid training, which can provide valuable insight and strategies. However, we must recognize that SROs cannot be considered a substitute for school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and others who are specifically trained to address the mental health and educational needs of children.

In Connecticut, 14% of elementary schools have SROs<sup>1</sup> and 38,906 Connecticut students attend a school that has a security guard but no counselor.<sup>2</sup> This should not be the case. We are hopeful that the provisions of this bill increase the opportunity to provide support to students in all communities.

HB 5001, SB 2, and other bills addressing children's mental health offer to comprehensively address the emotional needs of children in our state. They will require appropriate funding, much of which can be made available through the targeting of federal funds – discussion of which we recognize and appreciate is underway. We thank legislators and the governor for their bipartisan approach and leadership on this critical issue.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://education.uconn.edu/2020/10/27/the-prevalence-and-the-price-of-police-in-schools/#>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/cops-and-no-counselors>