

Testimony of

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Connecticut Education Association

Before the

Education Committee

Re:

**HB 5286 AAC The Development of a New Preservice Performance Assessment
for Teacher Preparation Programs**

HB 5287 AAC Remote Learning in Connecticut

March 4, 2022

Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of Education Committee, my name is Kate Dias, President of the Connecticut Education Association (CEA). CEA represents educators in over 150 school districts across the state.

I bring before you today testimony on two pieces of legislation: HB 5287 An Act Concerning Remote Learning in Connecticut and HB5286 An Act Concerning the Development of a New Preservice Performance Assessment for Teacher Preparation Programs.

I applaud the committee's review of the needs of educators and students as we emerge from this pandemic. We have been changed and have grown in ways that we never anticipated. These two bills address what we have learned.

Let me start with HB5286. We are facing a potentially tragic shortage of teachers. We know that upwards of 55% of teachers nationwide are considering leaving the profession, based on a recent NEA (National Education Association) survey. Educators have been attacked and maligned at a rate that would make you think they are elected officials. As a result, not only do we face a shortage with our current staff leaving, but we also struggle with attracting new educators. This bill is a good step in breaking down those barriers. The EdTPA program introduced new levels of cost and bureaucracy that drive students from the field. It has created an additional financial burden making access to this profession more difficult, particularly for young adults in underrepresented groups we are seeking to attract. Programs like EdTPA have not proven to enhance educator quality or student experience. They have only gotten private corporations rich, and that needs to end.

Additionally, let us revisit the PRAXIS program. In decades of standardized testing, we have only proven that testing is a great way to make money. Testing programs are artificial barriers that need to be re-examined. While some may find success on these tests, myself included, they are not the sole means to determine content mastery. We know standardized testing to be racially biased and suspect, so why should we rely on this barrier to career entry? Certification already requires rigorous academic training and degrees. Educators must have a bachelor's degree to establish academic ability and begin teaching and then must obtain a master's degree to maintain certification. So, we really must ask ourselves, what

is the purpose of the PRAXIS test? Again, testing agencies make big money off these tests, and our aspiring and potential educators do not need them to demonstrate content mastery. I strongly encourage you to abandon this outdated and racially bias reliance on standardized testing.

With respect the HB5287 I encourage the committee to learn along with me. I worked as a remote teacher last year. I know where it worked and where it did not. I saw the potential and the pitfalls. That is why I am proudly serving on the Remote Learning Commission established by the legislature last session. The work of the Commission has been insightful and provided a great deal of information for us to digest. My concern regarding HB5287 is that it fast-tracks a remote learning school for kindergarten to grade 12. I am not convinced that this statewide program is desirable and economically feasible. Through the Commission, we reviewed the work of the Virginia, Florida, and Massachusetts programs. These programs were expensive and did not yield tremendous outcomes. And in the case of the Massachusetts program, representatives of the program who presented to the Commission referred to their students as damaged. This begs the question for me, what would our program exist to do? When I ask that question, at best, I get answers like “help the medically fragile” and “improve equity.”

Let’s tackle the first desire: medically fragile students have long existed in school systems. They often require personalized learning and a system of homebound tutors to meet their needs. In some cases, a medically fragile student accesses online learning platforms under the direction of a local educator who can ensure that the student has needed support to succeed. Medically fragile students need caring adults who are connected to their communities.

The concerns around equity are more complex. I agree that there is a place for remote learning to expand local course offerings. If localities can work together to provide an online learning experience to students who would not otherwise have access to such an opportunity, that would make sense. Success would require that the learner be motivated, engaged and supported by local educators.

In Virginia, this is where their model excelled. This example of remote instruction can open doors when properly supported by on-sight educators. However, participation in an entirely remote program has proven to have adverse effects on students, particularly among vulnerable populations. Increases in truancy and decreases in engagement are common for students in a fully remote learning environment. When Virginia, Florida and Massachusetts made their different cases for remote instruction, none of them suggested that their approach would resolve equity or programming issues. In all three cases, the programs served students who were considered “at-risk” populations – last resort programs for students who have struggled. I would argue that it is a dangerous road for the population of students who need more supportive adult contact, not less. Additionally, all our concerns regarding student mental health are near-impossible to navigate in a remote environment. Students just disappear from the online learning world, and that is dangerous.

In a national survey of teachers by the EdWeek Research Center in May 2020 (i.e., during the height of the pandemic), nearly 45% of teachers reported that their students had lower levels of engagement compared to before the pandemic.ⁱ These national findings complement findings from a November 2020 CEA survey of Connecticut teachers.ⁱⁱ More than half of teachers said their biggest challenges and obstacles were,

- not seeing students face to face,
- parents not able to assist students with their schoolwork, and

- students unable to keep up with lessons because online learning did not allow teachers to differentiate among their students.

What have we learned? Students learn best in the classroom with a teacher providing ongoing encouragement and helping them when they start to fall behind. Where remote learning has worked for students, there have been several constants: high-level maturity of the learner, home support network, connection to local school district, and access to adult academic supports. And we have also learned that no one has proven remote learning to be successful with our youngest learners. Expanding remote learning from ninth grade all the way down to kindergarten, when we have not even established it as desirable or feasible, could have serious unintended consequences.

I was also surprised that the committee did not address the single greatest failure of the remote pandemic experience – dual instruction. Now is a prime opportunity to prohibit this counter-productive practice. Dual-instruction – the practice of expecting a teacher to effectively be in two classrooms at once – serves no one well.

I encourage the committee to stay the course. Let the Remote Learning Commission finish their work. Rushing this work will doom it to fail.

ⁱ https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/pb_santibanez_oct2020.pdf_0.pdf

ⁱⁱ Connecticut Education Association. (2020, November). CEA/AFT CT/WFSB COVID Survey.