

Testimony of
Lesley Keener
Before the Education Committee
Senate Bills 1 and 2, House Bill 5001
March 21, 2022

Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, my name is Lesley Keener and I have been a teacher in Newington Public Schools for 35 years. I almost made a career change to the private sector – and as you probably know, teachers are throwing in the towel across the country. It has always been a challenging career, but the last few years have been especially so. I've experienced firsthand and listened to so many colleagues and parents share their increasing concerns about children's mental, physical and behavioral health and well-being. I am here to support SB 1, and also wish to express my support for the related bills SB 2 and HB 5001, all of which address these concerns.

I started my career as the Head Teacher of the University of Hartford Early Childhood Center, then landed in Newington and taught grade 2 for 1 year, kindergarten for 25, grade 1 for 9 years and am now back in kindergarten this past year. I raised my own children in Farmington, who are now adults aged 22 and 28, and have collegial connections across Connecticut, including Bloomfield, New Britain, Avon, Farmington, Windsor, Rocky Hill, and Meriden, along with my hometown of Queens, New York. Going back to kindergarten after years away from this level and at the tail end of the pandemic, has magnified to me what many of us have been talking about for years. We are putting too much stress on our young people – and they are telling us so. They are throwing chairs, destroying school property, striking out, and crying for help. We continue to have achievement gaps, low literacy rates statewide, and an increase in teen suicides, vaping, and drug use.

These bills take important steps to help address Connecticut children's mental and behavioral health needs, along with safeguarding their physical and emotional well-being. We definitely need more support staff, services, and funding in the area of mental and behavioral health. But can these bills also help us unearth the tangled roots of why children are struggling more than before? I can attest to the level I am passionate about – kindergarten – but I think what's happening in K greatly affects the other grades. We have lost our focus on the development of oral language, critical thinking, coping and executive functioning skills because of the pressure and focus on academic skills from too young of an age - thus weakening the foundation for cognitive, emotional, and physical growth! To boot, we have curricula and assessments based on national standards and norms, yet we still are the only state bringing 4 year olds into kindergarten. Our children are starting behind the starting line of the rest of the country – and the world. We have to look at HOW and WHAT we are teaching along with how children learn best – at all levels – and this may help reduce the number of mental and behavioral health concerns and challenges we are seeing now.

Please continue your efforts and keep these bills in motion to help our young people. But also consider making a more drastic change for positive results. Get our kids on the same level playing field by changing the required kindergarten entry age to age 5 by August 31st. This is a lot more important than Daylight Savings Time. It will be a GIFT OF TIME for our little people. I thank you for your time today.

Mrs. Lesley Keener
lkeener@npsct.org