

Testimony of
Stephanie Wanzer
Connecticut Education Association
Before the
Education Committee
Re
SB 1200 An Act Concerning Special Education

March 15, 2023

Good evening, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee, I am Stephanie Wanzer, a special education teacher for a regional service center in CT, and I work with transition students aged 18-22. I have worked for a regional education service center for over 28 years as a special educator and job coach. I also serve as treasurer for the Connecticut Education Association.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak to SB 1200. CEA opposes provisions in SB 1200 permitting dual instruction, has concerns about the provisions addressing restraints and seclusion, and supports the provisions expanding the scope of the Special Education Task Force's review to include the caseloads of special education teachers (provided there is a commitment for the task force to be convened).

Regarding Dual Instruction

CEA strongly opposes Section 2 regarding dual instruction. Last year, the legislature had the wisdom to prohibit the practice of dual instruction – the simultaneous teaching to in-person and remote students. The two instructional formats – in-person versus remote – are dramatically different, and when teachers are asked to do both at the same time, student attention engagement and learning suffer.

From the experiences of our teachers, and based on recent research, dual instruction in the K-12 setting is completely ineffective and counterproductive. A study of divided or dual teaching in nine states by Lora Bartlett at the University of California, Santa Barbara, determined that it was fraught with multiple technology breakdowns, absent and unengaged students, and chaos in learning. When it comes to in-person or remote learning, it makes sense to concentrate on one or the other, not both, and avoid the added stress and loss of learning.

Given what we know, it is ludicrous that we would permit this detrimental practice for children receiving special education. Given last year's passage of the prohibition, the legislature has emphatically determined that an educational setting using dual instruction is out of bounds – illegal – for any child; it is especially bad practice for children requiring special education.

Restraint and Seclusion

As a special education teacher who has worked in a regional education service center for almost 30 years, I have witnessed the evolution of restraint and seclusion in Connecticut. I work with young adults aged 18-22 in a transition program in lower Fairfield.

My students, at times, have challenging behaviors, become dysregulated, and need support. They have behavior intervention plans as well as an individualized education program. We do not use restraint and seclusion to terrorize students or to confine them as a punishment. These interventions are used only as a last resort. In the rare cases that we would use restraint and seclusion, it would be in emergencies and if I, my staff, the student, or their classmates were in immediate danger.

The building I work in now does not have a timeout room, but I have worked in a school where we did. We have always used proactive means and a hands-off approach when dealing with dysregulated students. However, when explosive behaviors occur, and they do without warning at times, we need these avenues to make sure everyone is safe. Adding the language, you are proposing only makes my job and other educators' jobs more dangerous. It will also cause special education teachers to leave the profession in a field where there are already shortages. This bill makes us feel as though our safety and the safety of our students does not matter.

As I have said, I work with challenging students, and the school I work in does a great job of training us to handle these situations with respect and dignity toward our students. We are trained in physical management training (PMT). Some of the tenets of the program include understanding the crisis intervention process, developing skills for analyzing one's own style of managing conflict, helping staff manage their fear response in a crisis situation, developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and avoiding the use of physical restraint techniques. PMT training covers a wide range of interventions, all of which fall into one of the four stages of managing aggression: pre-violence, violence, post-violence, and prevention. We are not only trained but have yearly refreshers on techniques and proactive strategies.

In the field, we debrief after any behavioral incident. We are in contact with parents after an incident occurs and work together to move forward with steps to decrease future incidents from occurring. In the event that a timeout area or restraint is used, we constantly document all behaviors and observations, and using a timeout room requires a significant amount of paperwork to ensure transparency and to make sure appropriate staff are informed.

These areas are also used when a student requires a space with fewer stimuli. In such situations, the door is left open so that staff can monitor when a student's regulation level shows they are ready to re-engage in learning. Without a timeout room or the use of restraint when absolutely necessary, I fear more staff will be hurt to the degree of requiring workers' compensation, as I have seen in my own program. Additionally, students will fear for their safety and lose out on learning within the classroom if these interventions are extinguished.

I ask you to help keep all students and staff safe and think proactively about what can be done to address students' needs without altogether eliminating these interventions from our schools.

Special Education Task Force

CEA supported the provision in Public Act 21-95 establishing a special education task force, and I am an appointee to this group. However, this task force has never met.

CEA supports Section 3 of this bill, which would add to the scope of the group's work an analysis of special education teacher-to-student ratios and caseloads, among other things. Other states have addressed caseload and the impact of intensities of services. Our state could learn a lot from the work of other states through the work of the task force.

It is critical for the state to look at the many issues affecting the successful delivery of special education services. It is critical that this task force be convened and carry out its timely and important charge.

Thank you for your consideration.