

Testimony of

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Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

HB 6763 An Act Concerning an Audit of the State-Wide Mastery Examination

SB 1093 An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee Concerning Education

SB 1094 An Act Concerning the Implementation of Reading Models or Programs

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I thank the Education Committee for their time and attention to many important issues impacting teachers today. I am Kate Dias, President of the Connecticut Education Association and a high school math teacher from Manchester.

CEA supports the class reduction proposal in SB 1093, the flexibilities provided in the Right to Read Act waiver provisions in SB 1094, and the audit of state-wide mastery examinations in HB 6763 and offers additional suggestions and considerations. We thank the committee for raising these important bills for public hearing.

HB 6763 An Act Concerning an Audit of the State-Wide Mastery Examination

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, over-reliance on standardized testing and test scores has taken a heavy toll on students and public education. It has narrowed the curriculum and exhausted resources of time, staff, and money to the detriment of student engagement and preparation for the world beyond graduation. It is long past due that we assess the cost and impact of what has been a blind-faith commitment to standardized assessment.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes a provision that provides funding for states to audit and streamline assessments. We applaud the committee for raising a bill that would ensure that Connecticut pursues this option. More importantly, your proposal specifically addresses alternatives to mastery testing that could assess students' abilities to collaborate, communicate effectively, think critically and analytically, employ their creativity, assess their own knowledge and learning needs, and be conscious of the impact of their actions, and the actions of others, on civic and community life.

Why are these skills important? These are the skills represented in a "portrait of a graduate" that we all seek for our students in public school – whether we are parents, teachers, civic leaders, or fellow humans. These are the skills that employers also value, especially for innovative businesses that make Connecticut more competitive and attractive. We should be concerned that our assessment system is out of sync with these critical outcomes.

The consequences of our misaligned assessment system are that it:

1. Fails to promote the skills necessary for all students to be prepared for their future, whether in the workplace or college;
2. Fails to assess how well our schools do in preparing students for tomorrow;
3. Rewards higher-income communities with students from wealthier families whose wealth correlates with higher scores at the expense of lower-income communities and students;
4. Causes disengagement and disillusionment among many students;
5. Discriminates against students in lower-income communities by reallocating resources away from many subjects and disciplines other than math and English Language Arts(ELA); and
6. Discriminates against English Learners whose strengths and interests outside of ELA are squelched.

We urge committee members to implement this audit and streamline testing. We also ask that you do not stop there. Less testing does not mean less accountability. It means smarter accountability. We also have a unique opportunity to explore innovative assessment strategies based on work done in other states. For example, the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment ([MCIEA](#)) has developed groundbreaking ways to assess student performance and school quality. We believe work like this could be piloted in Connecticut to put our state at the forefront of education advancement.

More specifically, we ask the committee to create a Collaborative on Education Assessment and Innovation that would study, report on, and pilot assessment of student abilities for career and life success, including collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and self-assessment for knowledge and learning needs. To this end, we are prepared to share potential bill language for your consideration.

Additionally, for your consideration of this bill, we share with you our [CEA Policy Brief on Redesigning Education and Student Assessment](#). This policy brief reviews standardized assessment and innovative practices permissible under federal law. We hope you find it informative and helpful.

SB 1093 An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee Concerning Education

SB 1093 recognizes that dysregulated behaviors are fueled by policies that fail to connect students to resources and instead steer them down a disciplinary path toward suspension, expulsion, and potentially the criminal justice system. The proposals in SB 1093 continue the legislature's work to provide resources to students whose behaviors indicate a need for additional support, mental health counseling and treatment, and a more supportive school environment conducive to student development.

We commend the committee for recognizing the importance of including in the bill caps on class sizes. Class sizes can significantly impact the school environment, including the conditions that can affect students' mental health and emotional stress. The manifestations of emotional stress show up in very different ways – some obvious, some silent. Large class sizes make it harder for teachers to connect with

students and provide one-on-one attention, which can exacerbate the alienation, disengagement, and withdrawal that some students feel. This lack of connection also makes it more difficult for teachers to monitor emotional stress and the potential escalation of negative and potentially violent behaviors.

Early in my career, I had classes of 28 and 30. In those cases, students were crammed into classrooms and, between bodies and backpacks, I could not physically even get to students. There were no opportunities for quiet conversation and reflection on work and challenges, there was no space for collaborative work groups, and there was no time for me to make meaningful connections. A class of 30 teenagers learning math required me to focus on management and moving instruction along. I felt set up for failure. It was frustrating, and I knew those students were barely receiving the standard of an adequate education. Several years later, when my district was able to focus on reducing class sizes, I was teaching the same course with 20 students. What a difference! I could confer, offer creative projects, organize labs for students, and spend more time truly engaging with each learner. That is the experience all students should have – that is the experience all teachers should have!

It's no wonder that over 100 teachers have submitted testimony to this committee on the issue of class size caps alone. Class size matters for students, and it matters for the profession. As a teacher, the ability of teachers to make a positive difference in the lives of our students is what drives our passion. You can help us help more students in distress by making class sizes more conducive to supporting every student. And the positive byproduct of helping students is helping more teachers find joy in this profession.

SB 1094 An Act Concerning the Implementation of Reading Models or Programs

CEA supports this committee's proposal to provide school districts with more waiver flexibility in choosing a reading program in compliance with the Right to Read Act. We thank you for recognizing the concerns raised by teachers, administrators, and superintendents across the state.

CEA has submitted more in-depth comments on SB 1094 in the testimony of Faith Sweeney, a literacy coach with 27 years of teaching experience. I will summarize here. While we support the Right to Read Act's intent, revisions are necessary to successfully improve reading instruction. The highly prescriptive nature of the Right to Read Act makes it difficult for teachers to meet students' individualized needs. Pacing guides and required scripting substitute for better professional learning and flexibility to meet students where they are. Collaboration and creativity around literacy instruction are shut down, leaving students less engaged and interested in becoming readers.

We share the concern that the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS) has brought forward that commercial programs are not a silver bullet for literacy. In fact, programs are, by design, tools that should not supplant curriculum development at the local level. It is appropriate that the experts design curricula that meet the needs of their students and select appropriate materials to implement. When we mandate programs, we are not solving problems but rather creating barriers to meaningful and thoughtful solutions. We support the CAPSS proposal of creating a small working group to construct a model curriculum that can be shared statewide and encourage growth in this important area.

As the committee deliberates on how best to make the Right to Read act successful, we welcome an opportunity to connect our diverse literacy experts to the committee and others who help shape reading policies and their implementation.

Thank you.