



Connecticut Education Association

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Governance

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Testimony of

Connecticut Education Association

Before the
Education Committee

Re:

HB 5213 An Act Concerning Disconnected Youth
HB 5212 An Act Concerning Education Funding

February 28, 2024

The Connecticut Education Association (CEA) is the state's largest association of certified public school teachers, representing over 40,000 active and retired teachers from 160 school districts across Connecticut. CEA works to improve the lives of our teachers, the success of our students, and the quality of public education in our state.

HB 5213 An Act Concerning Disconnected Youth

We appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony on the issue of disconnected and disengaged youth in our state. Disengaged youth come from a variety of backgrounds, and they can face a myriad of challenges, including mental health, behavioral, and social challenges, substance abuse, reduced academic success, expulsion, and even incarceration.

HB 5213 is a good first step toward a coordinated approach to engaging youth who have become disconnected, resulting in a lack of academic success and reduced access to opportunities. The bill seeks to create a framework to comprehensively address student disengagement across demographics, through data-driven practices and diverse community partnerships. It focuses on students and young adults 14-26 years of age who have struggled with school or work, fallen into trouble with the law, struggled with substance abuse, or have otherwise faced challenges related to disconnection. It proposes, among other things, to do the following:

1. Study trends contributing to the challenge of disconnected youth in our state
2. Recommend changes to high school graduation requirements and reevaluate the ways in which we assess students and hold schools accountable, to promote greater student engagement
3. Assess opportunities for interagency and cross-branch collaboration, streamline resources, and promote cooperation among nonprofits and agencies delivering essential services
4. Conduct asset mapping, build capacity, and identify gaps in services
5. Enhance the role of youth service bureaus (YSBs) to help at-risk youth
6. Provide free city bus service for safe passage to school
7. Expand access to credit recovery and dual-credit opportunities

CEA teachers experience firsthand the growing challenges related to disconnected and disengaged youth. The findings of a recent Dalio Education report, "[The Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People Back on Track](#)," showcased the crisis of disconnected youth and adolescents disengaged from opportunities to learn and grow. Among the report's findings was that one in three Connecticut high school students are at risk of not graduating, and only about 40% of non-college-bound students identified as "disconnected youth" within a year of graduating high school were employed at the age of 22. Although student disengagement has been identified as a silent epidemic for nearly 20 years, researchers are noting that the crisis is deeper now as result of children's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

The impacts that stem from disconnection on the growth, development, well-being, life choices and opportunities available to young adults are significant and long-lasting. Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of challenges facing today's youth, a coordinated approach between school faculty, parents, boards of education, and governmental and non-governmental agencies is needed. Unfortunately, a lack of coordination and limited state and local resources have resulted in tens of thousands of at-risk youth every year dropping out of school, losing their jobs, or ending up in the correctional system.

As our members observe every day in their classrooms, and as research supports, disengagement among young adults is often rooted in their experiences as children from age 4 to 11. Children who have service needs in their early years are far more likely to be disengaged as young adults.² While the focus of this bill's attention on young adults ages

¹ Holquist, S. E., Cetz, J., O'Neil, S. D., Smiley, D., Taylor, L. M., & Crowder, M. K. (2020). The "silent epidemic" finds its voice: Demystifying how students view engagement in their learning. McREL International.

² Klassen, J. A., Stewart, S. L., & Lapshina, N. (2021). School Disengagement and Mental Health Service Intensity Need Among Clinically Referred Students Utilizing the interRAI Child and Youth Mental Health Assessment Instrument. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 12, 690917. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.690917>

14-26 is necessary, we cannot begin to resolve the pipeline of disengagement if we do not focus on the experiences of school-age children before they reach high school.

The good news is that over the last couple of years, the action of this committee has set in motion changes that will begin to help students engage with their school community. Restoring play, raising the kindergarten start age to five (which has a dramatic impact on school readiness), and investing in children's mental health and social and emotional growth all will make a difference. Addressing the negative effects of overtesting will, too, when the audit enacted by the legislature is completed.

CEA welcomes the Education Committee's efforts to further address this critical issue, and we look forward to working with committee members to identify strategies to better engage youth of all ages in our school communities. Our members are some of the best advocates for their students, as many of them dedicate significant time and personal resources to support disconnected youth and promote their success in the academic world and beyond.

The workgroup on assessment and school accountability measures is of particular interest to CEA and our members. This work is critical, as individual school districts and state government do not measure what it is that students, parents, and community members across the state increasingly demand from their schools. Together, they want students to develop the skills, competencies, and attributes we all expect graduates to demonstrate as they seek to build successful experiences in college, in their careers, as citizens, and in life. This approach/philosophy makes up what is commonly referred to as the "Portrait of a Graduate" being adopted by school boards across the state and country.

As we develop approaches to support disconnected youth, it's critical to understand *why* students disengage. Socioeconomics plays an important role in many cases, but students also "check out" of academic life when school seems irrelevant. Aligning assessment and accountability measures with the vision of the "Portrait of a Graduate" will demonstrate to students that we value their unique interests and skills and are committed to their success. This will result in increased student engagement, reduced dropout rates, and improved academic and social outcomes.

As committee members shape this bill, we ask them to consider:

1. Funding a **comprehensive community schools** pilot designed to engage students, parents, educators, and nonprofit service providers in addressing barriers to student success
2. **Expand the scope of the bill** to include students from pre-kindergarten through age 26 (the current language limits the scope of the bill to youth 14-26 years old)

3. Create an **ongoing role for parent and teacher engagement** in the implementation of community schools and other coordinated approaches to engaging disconnected and at-risk youth

Thank you again for your commitment to uplifting our state's at-risk youth. CEA strongly endorses this concept, and we remain available to facilitate this process in a way that supports our youth, empowers our communities, and provides our districts with the partnerships and resources they need to help our students succeed.

HB 5212 An Act Concerning Education Funding

We commend Education Committee members on their success last year in targeting \$150 million of additional funding to our public schools. The funding is poised to lift all boats, help soften the loss of federal relief funds, and protect districts from funding cuts due to declining enrollments. We urge legislators to continue this commitment and to reject proposals that would result in cuts to ECS funding.

HB 5212 seeks to supplement this by, among other things, inflation-adjusting the per pupil foundation amount used to calculate grants for magnet schools, including agricultural science. In the spirit of lifting all boats equally, CEA supports applying an inflation adjustment to the foundation level used to determine ECS grants to cities and towns.

The funding enacted last year was also intended to help districts attract and retain teachers. Yet educators have not seen these funds reach the classroom, improve learning conditions, or enhance compensation levels to attract new teachers and retain those seeking alternative careers. We urge committee members to stay the course on funding commitments made last year and to consider legislation to ensure funding is used by boards of education to attract and retain teachers.