



State of Connecticut  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
Commission on Children



Select Committee on Children  
Public Hearing  
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Testimony Submitted by Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director

Senator Meyer, Representative McMahon and members of the Committee. My name is Elaine Zimmerman and I am the Executive Director of the Commission on Children. I appear before you today to speak in support of many important bills that would improve the lives of children and families in Connecticut.

**House Bill No. 5500, An Act Concerning Enforcement of Bullying Policies and Establishment of a Safe Learning Environment for Children and Youth**

In October, several of your colleagues joined over 250 concerned Connecticut parents, students, teachers, counselors and administrators at a bullying forum at the State Capitol.

Forum speakers – including students, parents and educators – taught us that, in order to achieve academic success, students need safe, caring school communities that provide nurturance, high expectations and intellectual challenge. Participants called for safe school climate best practices in every school, increased training and professional development for school personnel, stronger data collection and reporting, more technical assistance from the state, and refunding of the Safe Learning Grant Program.

Students at the forum talked about the lifelong damage caused by bullying. When we fail to prevent bullying, the results impact learning, safety, and personal well-being. Bullies are more likely to drop out of school and to become adult criminals. Targets of bullying often feel isolated, lonely or depressed. Sometimes they attempt suicide. Schools can become violent and dangerous places where children feel unsafe to go and less able to concentrate and learn.

We are a long way from achieving a safe learning environment in our state's schools. One-third of Connecticut high school students – and more than 40 percent of the state's 9th graders – reported having been bullied on school property in the past year, according to a 2005 survey by the Department of Public Health. In just that one year, 16,000 Connecticut high schoolers were threatened or injured with a weapon at school; more than a quarter of those students (27.9%) were threatened or injured six times or more.

The Commission supports several elements of H.B. 5500 as an important strategy in reducing bullying. Statewide analysis and reporting on school policies and practices would improve our

state's ability to help schools institute effective approaches and to document their need for state assistance in building a safe school climate. The bill would also call attention to cyberbullying as a growing means of causing harm.

H.B. 5500 also re-funds the Safe Learning Grant program, in order to provide competitive grants to assist school districts in developing a school environment where children learn in safety without fear of physical or verbal harm or intimidation. Each local and regional board of education would be eligible to apply for a grant.

This re-funding of the Safe Learning Grant program would help schools to implement best practices in order to prevent bullying and violence and to build a safe learning environment. There are a number of nationally recognized anti-bullying strategies that take a whole-school approach in addressing the problem. Anti-bullying models which focus on the whole school reap the fullest gains. We strongly support this provision.

We are concerned that the bill language explicitly permits expulsion or suspension of students who bully (lines 55-64). Bullies will bully in the neighborhood if they are not in school. They need intervention and sanctions rather than punishment. We would suggest that this sends a non-research based message that bullying can be addressed through broad-based punitive measures. This is also a departure from state law enacted in 2007 that mandates in-school suspension under expanded circumstances.

### **House Bill No. 5490, An Act Concerning Student Health Data**

At a time when legislative leaders are building a results-based accountability system, our state's ability to answer the most basic "results-based" questions about children's health is woefully inadequate.

Connecticut invests an increasing amount of state funding to address costly chronic diseases by providing healthier school food choices and grants for community nutrition and physical activity policy and environmental change programs.

Yet we don't even know the scope of Connecticut's childhood health problems. There are no Connecticut statistics on childhood obesity, cardiovascular disease or diabetes. Without a data system in place, state policymakers are operating in the dark – we can't measure our progress, and we don't know whether our policies are succeeding.

We know from national data that many of these problems are worsening. It is estimated that 18.8% of children (6-11 years old), and 17.4% of adolescents (12-19 years old) in the U.S. are obese, up from 6.5% and 5.0% respectively in 1976; these rates are even higher among minority and economically disadvantaged children. These figures do not include children who are overweight and at risk for obesity.

We used to think that overweight issues start in adolescence. But new evidence published by the American Heart Association in 2005 indicated that the path to obesity can begin by age 3.

Childhood obesity has become such a threat to public health that it could reverse gains in reducing cardiovascular disease and death.

Obesity is associated with significant health problems in the pediatric age group, and is an important early risk factor for much of adult morbidity and mortality. Being overweight puts children and teens at greater risk for developing type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, liver disease, asthma, sleep apnea and depression.

H.B. 5490 would help meet the need for child health data by using existing health data systems in schools and the state to improve our data profile of children's health. This legislation grew out of last year's proposal by the Connecticut Childhood Obesity Council's task force on data reporting. The task force included local education, university, and health agency representatives, pediatricians and state agency representatives (Department of Education, Department of Public Health, Commission on Children).

Under this bill, the electronic data collection capabilities of public schools would be enhanced to transmit student health data to a centralized system for statewide analysis while keeping individualized student records anonymous.

By compiling aggregate data on diabetes, cardiovascular health, overweight and tobacco use from school health records, this data reporting would reveal the magnitude of the childhood obesity epidemic in Connecticut, as well as enable monitoring of several key health trends over time. It is not a "report card"; it would not lead to the release of any data on the health status of individual students to students, parents or anyone else. Rather, it would use the data in school health files to build a statewide student health profile of data for future policy and program planning.

This data system would enable state education and health agencies to strategically address obesity prevention and control interventions in areas of the state with higher prevalence rates, provide needed justification for federal and other funding opportunities, as well as provide the data needed to evaluate the effectiveness of school wellness policies, including the State Department of Education's nutrition standards aimed at reducing consumption of high-fat, high-sugar foods in Connecticut's public schools. The data would also allow for the evaluation of community-based strategies, and identify evidence-based model programs for adoption in other areas of the State.

For these reasons, the Commission strongly endorses H.B. 5490.

## **Senate Bill No. 266, An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study the Causes of Fatherlessness in Connecticut.**

The bill seeks to address the serious issue of many children growing up without the nurturance, support and involvement of their fathers. The State several years ago, under the leadership of Representative John Martinez, established a Fatherhood Council, PA 03-258. The Fatherhood Council represents key agencies in the executive and judicial branches of government as well as advocates and community based agencies serving the needs of families. The charge of the Council is to promote positive father involvement in the lives of children as well as address and change systemic barriers to positive relationships with fathers.

The Commission recommends that the Task Force link to the existing Fatherhood Council to leverage the wealth of expertise and experience they have in addressing this issue. With state and federal funds, several fatherhood initiatives are in place that seek to promote positive parenting relationships and help fathers obtain the education and training they need to financially support their families. The Task Force can help focus attention on this issue and enhance efforts to implement strategies to bring dads back into the lives of children.

We also urge the Committee to support inclusion in the budget of funds to support and expand these important fatherhood programs in Connecticut.

## **Senate Bill No. 270, An Act Concerning School Family Partnerships**

The Commission support efforts that build strong school-family partnerships to improve student achievement. Research has well documented the efficacy of such initiatives and several years ago, parent involvement was included in the school profiles submitted by school districts. This bill focuses on additional training and technical assistance for parents, teachers and other school personnel in “schools and districts in need of corrective action” and requires the “development and administration of a family-school partnership survey”. Focused efforts on school family partnerships should be an integral component of school improvement plans and the state should invest resources into building a strong, ongoing, technical assistance training program in professional development and school reform efforts to assist school districts to adopt best practices in promoting school family partnerships.

## **Senate Bill No. 339, An Act Concerning Child Nutrition Programs**

The Commission supports this legislation to increase participation in childhood nutrition programs that improve children’s health and their ability to succeed in school. The School Breakfast Program is an effective means to improve nutrition and reduce hunger among needy children; it also prevents obesity, improves students’ attendance, standardized test scores and achievement, and reduces discipline problems in school. However, Connecticut ranks last among all 50 states and the District of Columbia in the percentage of schools providing school lunches that also provide school breakfasts (51.5% in 2006-2007, even worse than in the previous year). This poor performance is a disservice to our children, whom we expect to meet the challenges of the school day, and to their teachers. It also means that Connecticut annually loses key federal funding due to low participation in the program, with \$7.8 million lost in 2006-

2007 alone, according to the Food Research and Action Center. This legislation would increase participation in the school breakfast program and introduce universal in-classroom breakfast, which reduces the stigma of receiving a free breakfast at school by providing all children with a nutritious start to the school day.

**Senate Bill No. 342, An Act Appropriating Funds for the Establishment of Six Additional Family Support Centers.**

The Commission supports funding for the six additional Family Support Centers to fully implement the mandated changes in Public Act 05-250, that prohibits the Courts from incarcerating youth involved with Family With Service Needs issues as status offenders. Four Family Support Centers operated facilities in Waterbury, Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport. The purpose of the Centers is to provide intensive early intervention services in a community setting to prevent further involvement with the courts and to provide services to address the root causes for the behavior. Funding for the additional centers is critical to the overall reform efforts underway in Juvenile Justice, most prominently the raising of the age of jurisdiction for minors to include 16 and 17 year olds.

We urge the Committee to support funding for this important public policy transformation that is underway in Connecticut's Juvenile Justice system.

**House Bill No. 5103, An Act Increasing the Funding for Summer Youth Employment.**

The Commission supports additional funding for summer youth employment programs and recommends that these programs report back to the General Assembly on progress in increasing the skill and educational levels of participants and report on how the programs are incorporating positive youth development components pursuant to PA 06-182 that established the Youth Futures Committee to embed positive youth development outcomes in all programs serving youth.

**House Bill No. 5134, An Act Concerning the Early Childhood Education Cabinet**

The Commission supports the additional members to enhance the work of the Early Childhood Cabinet. The proposed new members will add their expertise and experience to implementing the vision and recommendations in the Cabinet Report, "Ready by Five, Fine by Nine."

Thank you for your consideration of the Commission's views on these important bills.