

# Center for Children's Advocacy

University of Connecticut School of Law  
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## TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY IN SUPPORT OF RAISED BILL NO. 6569, AN ACT CONCERNING REPORTING OF SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES

March 9, 2009

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit organization based at the University of Connecticut School of Law. The Center provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy.

The Center initiated the Truancy Court Prevention Project (TCPP), a unique collaboration with the Village for Children and Families, the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), and the Connecticut Judicial Department. Through the program, eighth graders at Quirk Middle School and Burr Elementary School participate in court sessions held at school where a judge, who presides in an unofficial capacity, reviews students' attendance and academic progress. Currently, Appellate Court Judge Douglas Lavine and Superior Court Judges Steven Frazzini and Raymond Norko volunteer as the TCPP's judges. The TCPP also delivers legal and case management services to ensure students' completion of high school.

We strongly support the passage of Raised Bill No. 6569 because it targets areas crucial to the improvement of education in Connecticut. With the amendment proposed below, we support the Bill in its entirety, and are particularly focused on three provisions of the Bill: the creation of preventative plans for at-risk eighth graders, the creation of a standardized dropout formula and the increase in the age of voluntary withdrawal from school.

First, this bill requires schools with high dropout rates to establish preventative measures. Dropout rates are shocking. In Connecticut's cities, only about half of entering ninth graders graduate with a regular diploma.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of dropping out cannot be overstated. High school dropouts earn less money, have less opportunity for job growth, and are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup>

Effective intervention and school-level dropout prevention programs need to be identified immediately. Raised Bill No. 6569 requires school districts to plan interventions for students who show warning signs of dropping out. This provision appropriately targets students in eighth grade. Through our work with the Truancy Court Prevention Project, we have seen how difficult the eighth and ninth grade transition is for many students. Helping students successfully complete this transition leads to reduced dropout rates: repeatedly, research studies have shown that once students make it through ninth grade, they are more likely to graduate.

<sup>1</sup> See *Education Week Graduation Rate Map*, available at <http://apps.aredservices.com/edweeky3/default.jsp>.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Fields, *The High School Dropout's Economic Ripple Effect*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, October 21, 2008, at A13.



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**Second, this bill provides communities and policymakers with data to improve future efforts to reduce the dropout rate.** The first step in addressing the dropout crisis is to know how many students are not completing high school on time. Raised Bill No. 6569 requires the State Department of Education to create a standardized dropout formula and collect this data annually from school districts. The data collection proposed by Raised Bill No. 6569 is an important first step in providing that information to policymakers and the public.

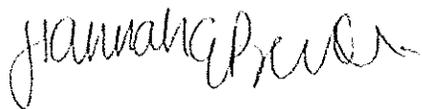
A number of national organizations, including the National Governors' Association for Best Practices and the State Higher Education Executive Officers, founded the Data Quality Campaign to encourage and support state policymakers to improve the collection, availability and use of high quality data to improve student achievement.<sup>3</sup> Accurate dropout data provides communities and policymakers with significant information to help create better schools, including why students leave public education, which school systems are successfully reducing the dropout rate, and what early warning signs of high school dropout schools can address in elementary and middle school. Connecticut must join this movement to improve the quality of its data so that its educational programs and policies are informed by data and thus responsive to students' needs.

**Third, this bill decreases the likelihood that students will be encouraged to voluntarily withdraw from school.** Raised Bill No. 6569 increases the age when a student can, with parental permission, voluntarily withdraw from school, enacting one of the system-wide prevention strategies recommended by the Family with Service Needs Advisory Board.<sup>4</sup> Combined with early prevention plans, this provision will reduce the number of students who dropout from school. In our work, we regularly see sixteen-year-old students who are encouraged to voluntarily withdraw after years of school failure. By requiring school districts to implement interventions for at-risk students and increasing the age when these students can voluntarily withdraw, Raised Bill No. 6569 will help to ensure that school districts address the root causes of dropping out, rather than encouraging these students to withdraw.

Although we support Raised Bill No. 6569's proposal to improve dropout rate data collection, we propose that Raised Bill No. 6569 be amended to require the standardized dropout formula to be consistent with federal law. Under U.S. Department of Education regulations, by the 2010-2011 school year, school districts will be required to report a graduation rate that reflects the number of students who receive regular diplomas at the high school, district and state level. School districts will also be required to disaggregate this rate by student demographic subgroups. To avoid the costs of inconsistent data collection, the standardized dropout formula created by the State Department of Education should be consistent with this requirement.

For the foregoing reasons, we believe that Raised Bill No. 6569 will help increase school attendance and high school graduation rates and strongly urge you to support it. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



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<sup>3</sup> The Data Quality Campaign's website can be found at [www.dataqualitycampaign.org](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org).

<sup>4</sup> Families With Service Needs Advisory Board, Report to the Connecticut General Assembly, February, 2008, pg. 69 available at [http://www.cga.ct.gov/kid/FWSN/fwsn\\_report\\_0208.pdf](http://www.cga.ct.gov/kid/FWSN/fwsn_report_0208.pdf).