

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. 6487, AN ACT CONCERNING THE REPORTING OF TRUANCY DATA AND RAISED BILL NO. 6489, AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL ARREST REPORTING

February 23, 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.

Through our TeamChild Juvenile Justice Program, the Center collaborates with the Hartford Juvenile Public Defender's Office and the Hartford Juvenile Probation Office. Our attorneys work to improve the child's juvenile justice outcome by securing needed services through community agencies or the school system. The Center's attorney represents the child on educational issues and access to mental health treatment, which may be at the root of the child's court involvement.

Raised Bill No. 6487 helps identify successful truancy reduction initiatives.

Truancy is an epidemic in many Connecticut schools. As our report, "Truancy: A Closer Look" explains, most of the youth in the TCPP demonstrated early warning signs, such as failing grades, multiple retentions, and very low academic achievement, but received few interventions.¹ As a result, these learning problems produced a downward spiral of discouragement that prompted children to avoid school. Our report showed that twenty-six percent of our sample exhibited patterns of absenteeism as early as kindergarten and first grade, with one of our students missing more than 2 full years of schooling by the 8th grade. Many of the youth in our truancy project have been socially promoted time and again, and have reading levels years behind grade level, causing them to give up and stay away from school.

The consequences of truancy cannot be overstated. Truancy is a strong predictor of students dropping out of school. High school drop-outs earn less money and have less opportunity for job growth. Truancy is also linked to juvenile delinquency.

¹ SPENCER, ANDREA & EMILY BREON, TRUANCY: A CLOSER LOOK (2006), available at [www.kidscounsel.org](http://www.kidscounsel.org/final%20truancy%20report%20dec%2020%2006.pdf) or at <http://www.kidscounsel.org/final%20truancy%20report%20dec%2020%2006.pdf>.



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Raised Bill No. 6487 would provide parents, educators and communities with critical information to help shape public policy around issues of truancy prevention. In order to be effective, truancy reduction programs must rely on interventions that have already proven effective after undergoing rigorous evaluation. Raised Bill No. 6487 allows Connecticut to begin to see what works best for its students and replicate those effective interventions throughout the State. Including truancy data within the strategic school profiles will make this information easily accessible to parents and community members.

Raised Bill No. 6487 does not require any new reporting by school districts. School districts are already required to report truancy rates to the State Department of Education under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Since SDE is already collecting this data to comply with federal law, this bill places no additional burden on school districts.

Raised Bill No. 6489 helps communities create policies to prevent the unnecessary arrest of children.

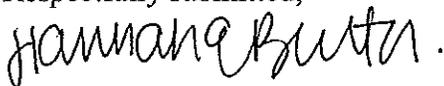
School-based arrests are on the rise and are occurring in a discriminatory manner. A recent American Civil Liberties Union report on school-based arrests in the Hartford area showed that school-based arrests have increased in some districts by as much as 32 percent in one year. Additionally, the report showed that children of color were significantly more likely to be arrested for the same offense as white children.² In our work, we frequently see how children with disabilities are arrested in school for non-violent offenses that are manifestations of their disabilities or could be handled within the regular disciplinary system. One of our clients, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, was arrested at school for yelling at a security guard while disobeying the guard's order to stay within the school campus. Another client, a child with ADHD, was arrested for running down a hallway and screaming at school staff. For many of these clients, a school-based arrest is their first interaction with the juvenile justice system.

Raised Bill No. 6489 would provide communities with information to assess practices surrounding school-based arrests. Communities have a vested interest in ensuring that children are not arrested unnecessarily; most juvenile justice-involved children never graduate from high school and arrested children are more likely to offend again. Yet in the absence of accurate information about what offenses result in arrests at school, communities cannot make informed decisions about potential policy changes, including the implementation of diversionary strategies or changes to school disciplinary codes.

Raised Bill No. 6489 does not require any new reporting by school districts. School districts already report school-based arrests to the State Department of Education. Raised Bill No. 6489 simply makes this information publicly available to help communities assess the use of school-based arrests. Furthermore, release of this data would not require the release of any personally identifying information about individual students.

Keeping children in school is crucial to improving their long-term opportunities. Students who feel connected to school are less likely to use illegal substances, become pregnant, attempt suicide or engage in violent behavior. Raised Bill Nos. 6487 and 6489 provide communities with important information to examine two causes of student disengagement from school: truancy and school-based arrests. For the foregoing reasons, we urge you to pass Bill Nos. 6487 and 6489. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



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² AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION & AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION OF CT, HARD LESSONS: SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER PROGRAMS AND SCHOOL-BASED ARRESTS IN THREE CONNECTICUT TOWNS (2008), *available at* http://www.aclu.org/pdfs/racialjustice/hardlessons_november2008.pdf