

Senator Coleman, Representative Sharkey, and Members of the Planning and Development Committee:

I am Susan Zimmerman, resident of Sprague, a small town in eastern CT. For several years I was the Director of Policy for FAVOR, a family advocacy organization. During that time, I heard directly from youth and families about the high level of out of school suspensions particularly in urban environments. I helped pass the In-school suspension law as a response to these concerns. I appear before you today to oppose SB 197 which would delay the implementation of the mandate until 2012.

As an elected official on my local Board of Education, I am well aware of the issue of unfunded mandates. The better question is whether an out-of school suspension saves money? Sending students out of school increases the likelihood of other public safety issues. According to Court Supported Services Division, 89% of juveniles arrested have been suspended and/or expelled in the past. Suspension also contributes to the achievement gap and high dropout rates.

For students that are repeatedly in trouble for a reason other than a diagnosed disability, leaving is likely to be the goal rather than the punishment. The offenses are often minor including skipping school or showing disrespect.

The majority of children who are at risk for behavior issues in school are diagnosed with learning difficulties arising from conditions such as autism or mental illness. These children are entitled under federal law to an appropriate behavior intervention plan. An out-of-school suspension would not be part of such a plan if it exists. While we could discuss the issue of the unfunded special education mandate, the in-school suspension mandate should not make a difference to these situations.

There are others here today better prepared to tell you about best practices which can be implemented with little or no expense. I am here to relate the story of my local school district which serves grades K-8. Five years ago the board approved a position for an intervention specialist to address the issue of suspending children. This was done on the recommendation of the superintendent who felt that the educational interests of the students were not being served when children left school for behavior issues. The intervention specialist was not costly—the position was filled by a paraprofessional. In the five years since the intervention specialist was hired, there have been no out of school suspensions in our school and no serious behavior issues. I don't know if it is a coincidence that the seventh graders in my school had the highest reading scores in the state of CT last year.

This is one story of a solution that was not costly. What should be said is that children who are sent home from school are not participating in learning at school. As the superintendent of my school has been heard to say, we are sending kids home to watch the Jerry Springer show.

I would ask you to reconsider your conclusion a delay in the implementation of this important mandate is a cost savings. There are costs to sending children home from school and it does not have to be expensive to keep children in school.

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