NAMI Connecticut
National Alliance on Mental Illness

Testimony before the Education Committee
February 28, 2011
SB 1038
HB 6432

Good afternoon, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Stillman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Alicia Woodsby, and I am the Public Policy Director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI-CT. We are the largest member organization in the state of people with mental health conditions and their families.

I am here today to testify on both SB 1038 An Act Concerning Individualized Education Programs, and HB 6432 An Act Concerning Closing the Academic Achievement Gap.

NAMI-CT supports the intent of SB 1038 to improve the communication with parents and guardians related to individualized education programs (IEPs), and to improve the quality of education for teachers and staff who are implementing the individualized education programs. Many family members are extremely confused by the IEP process, and do not have a full understanding of their rights or of the details of the program and implications for their child or loved one.

A specific area of concern is the use of restraint and seclusion in the school system, and particularly as a part of the IEP. The rate at which Connecticut schools use emergency seclusion and restraints is about ten times greater than in California – last year there were more than 18,000 incidents in our state. In December 2010, an article from the New Haven Independent indicated that California schools reported about 21,000 incidents in the same time period, and California's school population was 6,252,011 in 2009 as compared to 563,869 in Connecticut.

Currently, our state does not allow the use of restraint as part of a child's IEP, but we still do permit the use of seclusion. NAMI-CT is opposed to the use of restraint or seclusion as behavioral intervention strategies, and can only currently justify the use in cases where there is a danger of harm to self or others. We urge the committee to look further into this issue and to require better reporting and monitoring of incidents of restraint and seclusion in our schools. The current statutes are weak regarding the reporting and monitoring requirements. Had a reporter not made a request under the Freedom of Information Act, we still would not have any sense of the degree to which these practices are being used in our school system. Furthermore, a significant number of parents/guardians were not even notified about the use of restraint or seclusion on their child.

We must follow-up with schools that are over-utilizing restraint and seclusion or violating any state restraint and seclusions regulations and provide technical assistance and a corrective action planning process.

241 Main Street, 5th Floor, Hartford, CT 06106 • (860) 882-0236 • (800) 215-3021
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With regard to HB 6432, we urge the inclusion of mental health as a critical component in addressing our state's education crisis and closing the biggest achievement gap in the country. Research clearly shows that healthy children do better in school.

We believe that comprehensive school climate strategies are key to addressing the achievement gap and bullying, while school-based mental health clinics boost access to much-needed mental health services for children.

We urge the Committee to have a clearly designated role for mental health, mental health professionals, and families impacted by mental health issues on both the task force and Interagency Council outlined in this legislation.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions.

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