KEEP THE PROMISE COALITION
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Testimony before the Education Committee
February 28, 2011
Support for HB 1038 and HB 6432

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Eric Arzubi, MD; I am a physician and Co-Chair of the Children's Committee of the Keep the Promise Coalition, or KTP. Our Coalition represents Connecticut's key stakeholders in child mental health, including families, clinicians, school professionals, and advocates, among others. I am also a member of the Schools Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

The Children's Committee of KTP is in support of HB 1038, *AN ACT CONCERNING INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAMS (IEP's).*

This bill would improve the dissemination and communication of information regarding IEP's to parents and guardians and improve the quality of education for the teachers and staff charged with implementing them. Any efforts along these lines could only improve a process that can be a complex and confusing maze to negotiate for parents and guardians and better support implementation by school staff.

KTP would also like to see that seclusions be taken out of the IEP process altogether. Seclusions, like restraints, should only be used in emergencies: when a child is at risk of harming themselves or others, and not as a form of discipline. There is no therapeutic benefit to using restraints or seclusions and in fact their use may be traumatic for a child.

In addition, reporting of restraints and seclusions needs to be improved. Last year Connecticut reported more than 18,000 incidents of emergency restraints and seclusions – a rate 10 times more than the state of California. There is a need for more transparency and clarity in reporting so that we can better understand what is going on our schools with the aim of reducing the number of necessary restraints and seclusions. Schools that are over utilizing restraint or seclusion or violating regulations should be provided with follow up that includes coordinated training, documented improvement plans and monitoring of progress.

The Children's Committee of KTP is also in support of HB 6432, *AN ACT CLOSING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP.*

This bill would reestablish the achievement gap task force and develop a master plan to eliminate the academic achievement gap in Connecticut by 2020 along with several other provisions. The Children's Committee of Keep the Promise Coalition supports every effort to close Connecticut's academic achievement gap, our nation's largest. The Committee is Connecticut's broadest child mental health advocacy coalition and it includes patients and families, providers and clinicians, advocates, and, importantly, school-based professionals.

We strongly feel that the achievement gap can only begin to be narrowed by effectively promoting mental health among our children of all ages. Please think of emotional-behavioral problems as barriers to learning that affect 20% of school-aged children. Research shows that there is a strong, two-way connection between emotional-behavioral health and school performance: emotional-behavioral problems lead to academic struggles and vice versa. Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is an especially relevant example – it's a disorder that has touched us all directly or indirectly. Did you know that about 50% of children with ADHD also have a co-morbid learning disorder? According to a 2001 report from the U.S. Surgeon General, 12 percent of American children under the age of 18 have a diagnosable mental illness. Mental illness is the #1 reason for school drop-out among disability groups. For these reasons and others we must begin to address the role mental health plays in closing the achievement gap in Connecticut schools.

We must designate seats for knowledgeable and seasoned mental health professionals on both the task force and the Interagency Council to inform the design and implementation of a long-term strategic plan to close the gap. Connecticut is fortunate in that it is home to world-renowned child educators and mental health professionals – I urge the Task Force to tap experts from both fields as well as family members experiencing these issues first hand. There are far too many children in our schools who are at risk for bullying and juvenile justice involvement without early intervention and prevention strategies. Our Committee is dedicated to enhancing a continuum of child mental health services and supports that spans the home, school and community. As part of that continuum, we ask that the Task Force consider evidence-based programs to enhance school climate, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

We also hope that the Task Force will look outside of Connecticut to examine current best practices from around the country. The National Association of School Psychologists and the National Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA issued a joint statement encouraging policymakers to include strategies that enhance mental health when designing school-improvement initiatives (see attached). We cannot afford to ignore the achievement gap and we cannot continue to ignore the mental health and wellbeing of children in Connecticut.

Thank you for your time.