

TESTIMONY OF ERICA E. BROMLEY, MSW
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Regarding
S.B. No. 24 AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL COPETITIVENESS

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee: My name is Erica Bromley and I am here today as the Director of the Manchester Youth Service Bureau—a community-based youth serving agency that provides a variety of no-cost programs and services using a personal approach, facilitated by dedicated staff, for the purpose of helping to develop responsible individuals who make positive contributions to the community.

I would like to applaud the Governor, Commissioner Pryor and the Legislature for taking on education reform as a key issue. When making decisions regarding the professional development opportunities for teachers in Connecticut, I encourage the Legislature to keep in mind how school professionals are responding to student behavior.

Despite a decrease in overall rates of juvenile arrest, the proportion of arrests occurring in our schools is rising. Research shows that this ***growing proportion of in-school arrests is not caused by worsening behavior by students, but rather by a change in the ways adults respond to behaviors.*** Specifically, law enforcement presence in the schools and “zero tolerance” discipline policies that promote suspension, expulsion, and arrest exclude students from the learning environment, too often for minor and non-criminal behaviors. These harsh discipline practices are linked to less instruction time in the classrooms, negative socio-emotional and developmental outcomes, academic failure, and often dropout—particularly among our African American and Latino students and those with special education needs.

Providing professional development opportunities to train classroom teachers, administrators, school resource officers, and other key school professionals to recognize and effectively respond to behavioral issues and mental health needs among students is an effective solution to reducing exclusionary discipline and the resulting negative outcomes for our youth. In particular, training around effective classroom behavior management strategies, support around school discipline policy development, and linking schools to behavioral health services and supports and youth development opportunities in their local communities are positive strategies to promote positive school climate, increase academic achievement, and reduce school arrests, suspensions, and expulsions.

Some may think that the State cannot provide additional resources for schools at a time of such financial strain. However, by using available resources more effectively and efficiently, we can provide school officials with the training that they need to improve school climate. For example, OPM's Juvenile Justice

Advisory Committee developed a model Memorandum of Agreement for school districts that codifies the role of police officers and school administrators when school resource officers are in the schools.

Under this MOA, the Manchester Superintendent, Police Chief, Juvenile Court Judge, several state agencies and my organization, the Youth Service Bureau, got together to look at graduated sanctions, how to use diversion programs that already existed in our community and how to create more diversion options. This new system went into place this past fall. When we examined the preliminary data from the High School, comparing the first four months of 2011 to the first four months of 2010, school arrests were down:

In September, by 81%

In October, by 86%

In November, by 86%

In December, by 95%.

Important to note is that suspensions at the High School also decreased 54% during that period (Sept-Dec). With this new partnership, police and school administration are now referring much more often to diversion programs as well as to service providers for things such as substance use/abuse. This work is being done with strong leadership, the will to keep youth out of courts and in the classroom and a small influx of resources, most for trainings for staff through programs like the Connecticut Health Development Institute's School Based Diversion Initiative and other school climate trainings.

I believe that such a collaborative initiative can be replicated throughout the State with similar success and I encourage the Legislature to keep this model in mind when reviewing the professional development of school staff and administration under this new era of education reform.

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