



**TESTIMONY OF THE DISPUTE SETTLEMENT CENTER
FOR THE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
March 12, 2012**

**Regarding
HB NO. 5432, AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL-BASED ARRESTS**

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee, the Dispute Settlement Center (DSC) also supports HB 5432: An Act Concerning School-Based Arrests. DSC is a non-profit organization that works to reduce crime, violence and homelessness through the use of mediation and other restorative dialogue techniques. For youth at risk of or involved in the criminal justice system, we provide a number of diversion alternatives in western CT.

School-based arrests are a problem here in Connecticut. Pressure is mounting on the schools to address safety issues and mean behavior at school, but rather than using proven techniques to get to the root of the issues, there is a tendency to use immediate arrest as a solution for any issue. A safe school climate is recognized by many national institutions as a critical underlying prerequisite for students to achieve academically. We have been working with selected schools in western CT to implement the use of dialogue and mediation, in particular mediation performed by trained school staff, to get at the root of the grievances and allow the students themselves to be involved in creating a solution.

The power of the restorative approach to address school incidents of all kinds is shown in analyses done across the country. DSC has tracked a number of schools in its network of over a dozen middle and high schools in western CT over the last few years. In that period, the data shows a decrease in suspensions and expulsions when mediation activity is going strongly at a school. The data also show the corollary – an increase in suspensions and expulsions when the mediation activity dropped off. A Philadelphia High school saw suspensions decrease by half, assaults drop 66% and disorderly conduct drop 72% in the years following implementation of restorative practices. A high school in Pottstown, PA saw fighting and cafeteria violations each drop by half and the number of sanctions decreased by 78% in the two years after starting restorative practices.

The requirement in this bill for districts to have written, formal agreements regarding the roles and responsibilities of police in schools is an important step in the right direction. The schools and police departments need to have thought through and committed to using the various tools at their disposal – a roadmap for avoiding unnecessary arrests. With this roadmap on paper, it will survive staff turnover. Building awareness of the diversion possibilities and alternative approaches takes a collaborative effort and an investment of time on the part of both the school and the police. Alternative approaches can involve changing the way school staff or administrators interact with students and these kind of changes can be difficult for a school system to undertake. However, legislation like this bill can help remind them of the need to focus on longer-term solutions rather than fighting the daily fires. Together with the many community non-profit agencies with the expertise and ability to help, schools and police can and need to be a core part of the collaborative effort.

Having struggled to collect data on school suspensions, expulsions and arrests, DSC knows first-hand how critical the second section of the bill is for all those involved in this collaborative effort. The non-profit community is particularly in need of metrics in order to attract and engage the kind of funding that allows for systemic community-wide problem-solving. Collaborative, public-private partnerships to address school-based arrests are starting to emerge in a very select few locations in CT, but these small specks of hope can easily be extinguished without an at a minimum regional, preferably state-wide impetus. Data is the catalyst, the beginning point that can galvanize all the parties that are needed to come to the table. It is also the only way to measure the improvement and motivate all involved over the many years needed to bear fruit for this challenging social issue.

Thank you for your time and attention.

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