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National Education Association

**Testimony of Jeff Leake
Vice President, Connecticut Education Association**

Before the Education Committee

**Regarding Raised Bill 877 'An Act Concerning The Entrance Age for When A
Child May Enter Kindergarten and HB 6384 'An Act Concerning English
Language Learners'**

February 15, 2013

My name is Jeff Leake, Vice President of the Connecticut Education Association and I am commenting on Raised Bill No. 877 and Raised Bill No. 6384

The Connecticut Education Association supports the statement of purpose of Raised Bill 877: by phasing in an earlier cut-off date for when a child must turn five years of age in order to enroll in kindergarten for such school year and limiting the circumstances in which a parent may withhold enrolling their child in in kindergarten until the child is seven years old we will make it more certain that our kindergarten teachers will be able to employ curriculum that meets the needs of these youngest learners. Wide age spans in kindergarten classes can make it difficult for teachers to implement a curriculum that accommodates children's substantially different levels and paces of learning.

In fact, a majority of states will continue to have an earlier cut-off date than Connecticut. In that regard, this legislation might not move far enough. But we support this bill as a move in the right direction in that it will narrow the age and readiness range that now exists.

Teachers of kindergarten and other early grades continually stress the importance of children in their classroom being "ready to learn" – a term that can refer to maturity levels as well as the sort of preparation that results in children knowing the alphabet, identifying colors and shapes, and understanding the basics of numeracy. Children who are ready to learn have undergone developmental maturity that makes them more likely to succeed in a formal school setting. These proposed changes would increase the probability that children starting kindergarten will have reached a developmental level conducive to the rigors and socialization of the kindergarten curriculum.

In addition, there is a growing body of evidence that initial maturity differences have long-lasting effects on student performance in OECD countries. In particular, the youngest members of each cohort score 4–12 percentiles lower than the oldest members in grade four and 2–9 percentiles lower in grade eight, thereby creating an achievement gap of a completely different nature.

All of this will make the most sense, of course, when coupled with an enhanced pre-school and full-day kindergarten experiences for all CT's children. All of these changes, working together, will help close America's school readiness gap and ensure that children have the chance to enter kindergarten ready for success.

The Connecticut Education Association also supports Raised Bill 6384 that will ensure those English language learner students are not disproportionately and inappropriately identified as requiring special education due to reading deficiencies.

My testimony this morning is taken from a document entitled "The Truth in Labeling: Disproportionality in Special and Gifted Education", a collaborative effort of the National Education Association (NEA) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP).

Labeling students as disabled when they really are not leads to unwarranted services and supports. Misidentified students are likely to encounter limited access to a rigorous curriculum and diminished expectations. Most importantly, mislabeling students creates a false impression of the child's academic potential.

Unfortunately, a variety of policies, procedures, and practices exist at district, school and classroom levels that can lead to overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse populations in special education programs.

Oftentimes, out of concern for their students and a determination to get them extra help so they do not fall behind academically, some teachers exercise the only option they think is available to them: referring students to special education programs. This option will not be necessary if the following questions are given serious reflection by a district:

1. To what extent are quality early childhood services available in your community?
2. How are children from low income homes provided with opportunities to develop academic readiness skills
3. How are ELL students provided with the supports and time they need to develop academic language proficiency?
4. How culturally appropriate is the curriculum?
5. To what extent do students receive universal screenings and early intervening supports prior to a referral for a special education evaluation?

We believe that if teachers, administrators and parents engage in a true dialogue about these questions, systemic change will take place and incidences of inappropriate special education referral and identification will end and every child, no matter his or her racial, cultural, or linguistic background, will receive the appropriate and high quality education that each of our children deserve.