

Center for *Children's* Advocacy

Testimony of Leon Smith, J.D. on behalf of Center for Children's Advocacy In Support of Raised Bill 6504: An Act Concerning Alternative School Programs

Education Committee
March 4, 2013

I submit this testimony on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit organization based at the University Of Connecticut School Of Law. The Center provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. I am the director of the Center's Alternative Schools Reform Project, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Our aim at the Alternative Schools Project is to promote positive reform to the alternative school system to ensure that all students receive appropriate educational services, increasing the percentage of youth who graduate from high school and improving overall educational achievement.

To that end, this staff at this project has gone across the state visiting alternative school programs, speaking with community based organizations, parents and youth about their experience in alternative schools and providing legal representation to students who have been placed in alternative school settings. Based upon these experiences, we strongly feel that alternative school programs in Connecticut are in need of reform. To that end, we support Raised Bill 6504 for the following reasons:

1. Raised Bill 6504 will help ensure that Alternative School Programs provide a quality educational experience that is comparable to their public school counterparts

Currently, many alternative schools do not offer the same number of class hours or course offerings as regular schools, causing them to offer an inferior educational environment that acts as a "dumping grounds" for vulnerable students and becoming the first stop on the road to school drop-out.

- In one district's alternative school, the Class of 2010 did not have any graduates: 70% of the class dropped out and 30% continued for a fifth year.¹
- At another alternative school, students have been pushed out of attending high school during the day with peers. Instead, they are attending in the late afternoon or night, sitting alone at computers with little to no instruction by a teacher, despite the fact that many are special education students and behind by many grades in reading. The program provides only two-thirds of the number of educational hours required by the State for public high schools, and lacks required subjects, including foreign language, physical education, and higher level science and mathematics.

¹ See "Invisible Students: The Role of Alternative and Adult Education in the Connecticut School to Prison Pipeline: A Report from A Better Way Foundation & the Connecticut Push-out Research and Organizing Project", (December 2011) pg. 52.

An Act Concerning Alternative School Programs would address the inferior quality of many of many of these schools by **requiring:**

- Alternative school programs- to provide the same minimum number of school sessions, class hours and hours of school work each year as traditional public schools pursuant to §10-16 of the general statutes and the same minimum program of instruction as traditional public schools pursuant to §10-16b of the general statutes
- That whenever a student with special education needs is expelled, an alternative school program must be offered that is consistent with the special and educational needs of the child

2. **Raised Bill 6504 will define “alternative school programs”and ensure the supervision and accountability required of traditional public schools**

Currently, alternative schools in Connecticut are essentially “invisible”. While regular public schools are required to provide the State Department of Education with reports that are made public and include information about test scores, attendance, instructional hours, subjects and resources, alternative schools are exempt from these requirements due to many being considered “programs” rather than “schools”.

- The current ambiguity and lack of definition of alternative schools leaves these schools operating without appropriate oversight and leaves parents and youth with a lack of readily available information about the quality of these schools.
- Due to the lack of reporting requirements and transparency, there is no comprehensive data regarding the youth in alternative schools or the quality of their education

An Act Concerning Alternative School Programs will help bring alternative school programs into the light by:

- Defining alternative school programs;
- Requiring each local and regional board of education’s strategic school profile report to include the program of instruction offered as part of an alternative school program, including the number of students enrolled in such a program;
- Mandating that each local and regional board of education provide information relating to alternative school programs on the board's web site including the purpose, location, contact information, staff directory, and student enrollment; and
- Requiring that any operations and instructional audit of a school performed by the State Department of Education, in concert with the local or regional board of education, include a review of any alternative school program offered to students at the school.

3. **Raised Bill 6504 will provide appropriate safeguards to ensure that students who attend Alternative School Programs do so voluntarily and are not “pushed out” of their public schools in the process.**

Currently, parental consent is not always required of schools seeking to transfer students from public schools into alternative schools. Students are counseled, coerced and involuntarily placed in alternative school programs in a variety of circumstances:

- Although students have a legal right to remain in public high school until the age of 21, students as young as 16 with histories of truancy, academic struggle and discipline are told by school personnel that high school “isn’t working” and that they must withdraw and attend an alternative school;
- Students with discipline issues are threatened with expulsion unless they voluntarily withdraw;
- Schools fail to disclose the information required for the student and parent to make an informed decision or even misrepresent the law by conveying that they have no other choice
 - There are reports of parents who did not speak or read English were given papers, without explanation of what they were or the rights the student was entitled to, and told that they had to sign.²

An Act Concerning Alternative School Programs will help ensure that placements into alternative programs are voluntary by:

- Requiring the placement of a student in an alternative school program is subject to the informed consent of the student and their parent or guardian, and that the refusal of a parent to accept said alternative school program will not subject them to the educational neglect provisions of §10-184 of the general statutes.

To address the challenges and proposed solutions outlined above, we respectfully submit the following proposals for Raised Bill 6504. Thank you very much for your time and attention to these very important issues impacting the quality of education for our youth.

Respectfully submitted by:

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² See “Invisible Students”, p. 38