

Higher Education Committee

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HB 6562 An Act Concerning Adult Education and Transition to College

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My name is Amy Miller and I am the Program & Public Policy Director at the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF). CWEALF is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the personal and professional lives of women, girls and their families. For decades, CWEALF has evaluated and researched workforce issues in Connecticut.

I submit this testimony on behalf of the Campaign for a Working Connecticut, which CWEALF has led since its founding in 2006. The Campaign shares an aligned vision: to promote Connecticut's economic competitiveness through the development of sustainable, effective workforce solutions to increase workers' skills and advance families to self-sufficiency. The Campaign works to accomplish this goal through a unique and diverse statewide coalition of over 50 members including education and training providers, workforce investment boards, advocates, unions and chambers of commerce. The Campaign's legislative agenda advocates for investments in career pathway programs.

Our experience has taught us that in order to meet the needs of the diverse population of Connecticut, an array of options must be available for individuals to access lifelong learning opportunities. Therefore, we are submitting this testimony in support of the concept of HB 6562, An Act Concerning Adult Education and Transition to College. HB 6562 allows for local adult education centers to begin providing college preparation classes to individuals who have already obtained a high school diploma. Some reports indicate that 312,000 CT residents with high school diplomas have demonstrated skill deficits in math and English which will limit their ability to pursue secondary training opportunities and employment. Additionally, with 61 percent of individuals who enrolled in Connecticut Community Colleges in 2012 being placed in developmental classes this is an issue that deserves attention.

Last year, Connecticut made reforms to the K – 12 educational system; however, as noted above, there are a significant number of people who have already graduated that will not be helped by these reforms. In an effort to address the skills deficit in adult learners, there was also legislation was passed last year (unfunded) that required community colleges to imbed additional support into courses, so students did not have to spend Pell grants and other resources in remediation classes as they sought to enroll in post-secondary education. While these efforts are important, there is more we can and should be doing.

We are all very familiar with the statistics, the more educational obtainment, the more likely the individual is to work and generally earn higher wages. For example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012 Current Population Survey, adults without a high school diploma have an unemployment rate of 12.4%. For individuals who had finished high school, that number drops to 8.3% and to 6.2% with an associate's degree. Women with high documented literacy are 94 percent more likely than women with low documented literacy to make between \$650 and \$1,149 per week and 353 percent more likely to make between \$1,150 and \$1,949 per week (Institute for Women's Policy Research, *Low Literacy Means Lower Earnings, Especially for Women*, February 2012).

As Connecticut has implemented new programs and designed different strategies to address the current workforce shortages, by necessity, the system has to be flexible in its approach. This bill expands the range of tools available to maintain that flexibility and provides more options for residents to increase their skills and employability. However, as currently written, it seems to require them to serve more people without additional resources and without clearly delineated roles and connections to other systems.

Adult Education programs are excellent resources for people to develop skills and prepare for new journeys. The teachers are certified, professional and innovative. Unfortunately, this bill fails to make resources available to support its intention. At present, the adult education programs in Connecticut are stretched to meet the current demands. Reports have found that while 32,000 individuals are served through the state's Adult Education system, another 181,000 could be enrolled if resources existed.

Without investments in the educational and occupational skills of low income adults, we will continue to miss the opportunity to provide Connecticut employers with skilled workers. Reports in Connecticut have shown that businesses across our state need workers with basic skills in reading and math as well as transferable skills such as problem-solving, team work and decision-making combined with specific occupational skills which meet the technical needs of industry. Without a multi-pronged approach to career pathways, which include job readiness training, basic skill and language instruction and work supports, we will not address the needs of residents or businesses in the state. Therefore, I urge you to continue to explore options like the one outlined in 6562 but do not pass an unfunded mandate.