

My name is Dana Wikander and I am the Supervisor of Case Management for the Bridgeport Juvenile Review Board. Thank you for the opportunity to address H.B. 6682, An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel.

I am writing in support of H.B 6682 and I urge you to pass this legislation. Below you will find that my experience working in partnership with the Bridgeport Police Department and the Bridgeport Board of Education has given me firsthand knowledge of the importance of collaboration between these two agencies and how effective working relationships have a positive impact on the youth in our community.

In the wake of the tragedy in Newtown, the reaction of many communities is to place law enforcement officials within schools across the state to make them safer and to protect our children. Although the intent is purely for safety and security of our youth, often times, especially in cities like Bridgeport, the presence of police only results in increased arrests of young people for minor incidents that could and should be handled within the school.

About a year ago in Bridgeport, the Board of Education and the Police Department signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) outlining the specific roles of all personnel working in the school system, specifically those of the police officers stationed in the schools and the policies and procedures that should be followed whenever there is behavior that disrupts the school. This MOA was put in place to ensure that any police presence in schools is focused solely on the safety of students and not as a tool to arrest youth engaging in behaviors, though poor in judgment, are merely those of a growing adolescent.

The program which I oversee, the Juvenile Review Board, is a diversionary program serving as an alternative to Juvenile Court for non-violent offenses that often times involve behaviors thought to be “normal adolescent behaviors.” A good portion of the offenses that the JRB has received and continue to receive are true diversions from court and instances where the youth was arrested and charged with a crime. That is, if there were no alternative to Juvenile court such as a JRB or other community diversion program, youth who are arrested for these offenses would be given a summons to appear in court, be assigned a probation officer and likely be placed on administrative supervision for a period of time all resulting in a juvenile record.

Prior to the signing of the MOA, the misuse of police who were stationed in the schools in Bridgeport was very evident. The Juvenile Review Board received diverted referrals for “offenses” as absurd as two youth arguing, cursing or yelling at one another or in one particularly unreasonable case, a youth who refused to take off his hat in class. These types of youth were often “charged” with Breach of Peace or Disorderly Conduct and often times were charged with both. In the majority of these types of cases, the principal or other Administrative staff at the schools began to utilize police as a scare tactic. They viewed an arrest of a youth for their unruly behavior as a perfectly justifiable way to set an example for other students. This knee-jerk reaction only emphasized schools use of the “easy way out” and helped to normalize an arrest as a response for behavior that can and should be addressed solely within the schools.

Since the signing of the MOA here in Bridgeport arrests are down significantly. There is now an established set of expectations and clearly defined roles for school staff, School

Resource Officers (SRO's) and other police stationed in or around the schools. School staff are now held more accountable to take the lead on minor incidents that occur and look at them from "Classroom, School Administration and Community Intervention levels," providing different disciplinary and intervention options within each level. Should any of these interventions fail (or in serious emergency situations) then and only then would there be a request for "Law Enforcement Intervention."

Furthermore, though the MOA provides and even encourages discretion among school staff and police, it does it in a way that is sensitive to the needs of youth as well as in a manner to reduce disproportionate minority contact. For example, school staff are encouraged to take into consideration a youth's lack of prior disciplinary reports as well as their desire to repair the harm done or any disabilities they may have including special education diagnoses. However, the MOA does not allow for any variations in consequences due to the economic status of the youth or family or any regard to the youth's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or religion.

Bridgeport is one of many communities in Connecticut that have recognized the need to have a MOA between police and the schools they are stationed in and after implementing one, have seen the positive outcomes it has generated. As mentioned, arrests are down significantly as are referrals to the JRB for minor offenses. Schools, police and other community providers have begun working more collaboratively and coherently, an expected outcome when everyone is aware of what their roles are and which consequence or intervention should be utilized for certain behaviors. Youth begin to respect adults more when they see that they are implementing consequences on an equal level and in a

manner that shows they truly care about their well-being and do not want them removed from their classroom, school or taken away in handcuffs.

Again, I urge you to pass H.B. 6682 An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel. Requiring the Board of Education to work together with the police that may be stationed in their schools is paramount to ensuring that our children are protected both from a tragedy like what occurred in Newtown as well as from the police that we station there to protect them in the first place.