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**TESTIMONY OF AFRICAN CARIBBEAN AMERICAN PARENTS
OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, INC. (AFCAMP)
BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
IN SUPPORT OF RAISED HOUSE BILL NO. 5355 AN ACT CONCERNING COLLABORATION BETWEEN
BOARDS OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS
AND RAISED HOUSE BILL NO. 5357 AN ACT CONCERNING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

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Executive Director

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee, AFCAMP submits the following testimony in support of Raised House Bills No. 5355 and 5357. AFCAMP is a parent-driven nonprofit organization with a mission to educate, empower and engage parents and community to improve quality of life for children with special needs and others at risk of education inequity or system involvement.

House Bill No. 5355

The proposed legislation would (1) require school districts choosing to place school resource officers in schools to adopt formal policies or Memoranda of Agreement (MOAs) with their local police departments; and (2) require the inclusion of data on suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests in the annual strategic school profile report that school districts already submit to the Commissioner of Education. Such policies and MOAs can help school and police personnel collaborate in a manner that addresses safety concerns while contributing to a positive educational environment and establishing safeguards against unintended consequences. Better data will help to identify patterns of student exclusion from schools and inform local and statewide decision-making around effective ways to keep children in school and to reduce school-based arrests.

Although not limited to urban communities, police presence in schools has been a long-established practice in many urban communities across the country. It is a familiar occurrence in several school districts in which we work with parents of students who have various physical, mental and emotional health needs. While recognizing the important goal of school safety for all children, some concerns regarding the unintended consequences of police presence in schools must be acknowledged. It is documented that students of color are more likely to be arrested at school than other students, as are students with disabilities. Expulsion rates for students with disabilities are twice that of their non-disabled peers. Nationally, Black students are expelled twice as often, and Latino students are expelled 1.5 times more often than white students. There is some data pointing to similar or even higher rates for Connecticut, however, the data is incomplete and that is one reason why the data collection provision of this bill is so necessary.

AFCAMP is one of several organizations working with the Center for Children’s Advocacy on Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Reduction Projects that seek to reduce the number of school-based arrests for minor offenses and the disproportionate impact on youth of color. School-based arrests are a major factor in the proliferation of the school-to-prison pipeline, a phenomenon in which children of color are disproportionately and unnecessarily referred to law enforcement by schools. School-police MOAs, such as the legislation before you would require, have been adopted in several Connecticut school districts, including Bridgeport, Hartford, Manchester, Stamford, Willimantic and Windsor. These MOAs have resulted in reduced numbers of inappropriate school-based arrests and have lessened the disproportionate juvenile justice impact on youth of color. For example, Hartford reduced school-based arrests by 44% and Bridgeport’s reduction was 31%.

H.B. 5355 is consistent with recently issued guidance by the U.S. Department of Education: “schools should provide clear definitions of the officers’ roles and responsibilities...and continuous monitoring of the program’s activities through regular data collection and evaluation... Schools and districts should document the expectations for officers’ roles through clear, written policies or MOUs between school administrators and law enforcement personnel.”¹

Not all, but a substantial portion of school-based arrests are for non-violent, non-dangerous offenses that equate to normal adolescent behavior and might very well have been handled by the school’s own discipline policies rather than referral to law enforcement. Where conduct may be a manifestation of a student’s disability, it is particularly important that school districts and law enforcement agencies carefully delineate how school and police personnel will respond.

The school-police MOAs proposed in H.B. 5355 will ensure that those school districts choosing to place police personnel in schools engage in thoughtful deliberations with their local law enforcement agency to develop graduated responses to student behaviors that will be appropriate, safe and equitable for all students.

AFCAMP urges you to act favorably on Raised House Bill No. 5355.

House Bill No. 5357

This proposed legislation would (1) define chronic absenteeism; (2) require the establishment of school attendance review teams to review the cases of chronically absent children; and (3) require the inclusion of data on chronically absent children in the annual strategic school profile report that school districts already submit to the Commissioner of Education. These provisions are important for the early identification of children who may require special education services or other interventions to support their educational progress.

AFCAMP urges you to act favorably on Raised House Bill No. 5357.

Respectfully submitted.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline, January 2014 (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>).