

State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Testimony before the Education Committee
Submitted by Steven Hernández, Esq., Director of Public Policy and Research
Connecticut Commission on Children
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Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, Ranking and other esteemed members of the Education Committee:

My name is Steven Hernández, Attorney and Director of Public Policy and Research for the Connecticut Commission on Children. I am here to offer the Commission's testimony in support of:

- S.B. 25, An Act Establishing The Office Of Early Childhood;
- H.B. 5355, An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards Of Education And School Resource Officers;
- S.B. 282, An Act Concerning The Inclusion Of Teen Dating Violence Education In The Public School Curriculum;
- H.B. 5356, An Act Concerning The Inclusion Of Social Media Education In The Public School Curriculum; and
- H.B. 5357, An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism.

I will focus most of my testimony today in support of House Bill 5357, *An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism*.

Good attendance is essential to student achievement and graduation. Simply put, children must be in school to thrive academically. But too often, students, parents and schools don't realize how quickly absences – excused or unexcused – can leave children and youth falling behind. Chronic absence – missing 10 percent of the school year, or just 2-3 days each month – predicts lower third-grade reading proficiency, course failure and eventual dropout. Research shows that 10 percent is the threshold where absenteeism correlates to poor academic outcomes.

The impact hits children of color and low-income students particularly hard, especially if they don't have the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom. These children are more likely to face systemic barriers to getting to school – such as unreliable transportation or conflicting parent work schedules. Other factors that contribute to chronic absence may be situated in the family, school, and the community. They include but are not limited to high family mobility, low maternal education, food insecurity,

inadequate healthcare, ineffective parent engagement, and high levels of neighborhood violence.

In Connecticut, the data show these disparities clearly. According to State Department of Education 11.5 percent of all Connecticut K-12 students were chronically absent during the 2012-13 school year. Students eligible for free lunch are three times as likely as their peers who are not eligible for lunch subsidies to be chronically absent. Black/African American students are about twice as likely and Hispanic students are more than two times as likely as White students to be chronically absent. English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities also evidence substantially higher chronic absenteeism rates when compared to their general education peers. Finally, chronic absenteeism rates are higher in urban districts.

According to Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, a national initiative that promotes awareness of the important role that school attendance plays in achieving academic success starting with school entry, there are three main factors that lead to poor attendance:

Discretion – Families don't realize that missing just 2 days a month every month could be a problem or they may not know attendance in kindergarten is important

Aversion – the child is being bullied or a class isn't meeting their educational needs

So-called "real" barriers – such as transportation, poor health, etc.

This past year, the Commission on Children partnered with Attendance Works, the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, the State Department of Education and the Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap, and the Committee on Children to quantify the problem of chronic absenteeism in the state, to explore best practices, and to consider possible infrastructure, policy and legislative changes to improve how we track chronic absenteeism in the state.

In November, we held a public forum at the LOB titled, *Here to Learn: Chronic Absence and the Achievement Gap*. At the forum, Hedy Change presented a keynote address warning that chronic absenteeism is a national crisis which is exacerbating achievement gaps and dropout rates. She noted that nationwide, an estimated 5 million to 7.5 million students (more than one out of 10) are chronically absent every year.

We also learned that, with the right interventions and policies in place, chronic absence can be turned around when schools, districts, community agencies and families work together to monitor the data, identify and remove barriers for getting students to class, and nurture a habit of regular attendance. State policy and action are essential to advancing such practice.

From our collaboration with our state and national partners, and based on statewide and national best practices not being developed and tested at SDE, we propose a discrete set of recommendations that we hope will buttress the recommendation in House bill 5357.

In addition to distinguishing truancy from chronic absenteeism in statute, the Commission proposes that we follow the State Department of Education's lead in

establishing a chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan for the state. Such a plan would address:

An information strategy to engage community, families, and students on what chronic absence is, why regular attendance matters for success in school, and how strong school, community and family partnerships can improve student attendance.

The possibility of infrastructure and technical support to enable consistent and accurate attendance data collection disaggregated by school, grade and subgroups, including race, gender, free or reduced lunch, and English Language Learners.

The plan could also include a research-based, data-driven mentorship model that seeks to prevent and address chronic absenteeism, such as one being piloted successfully in New York City, and incentives and rewards to recognize schools and students that improve attendance, which may be in collaboration with the private sector and philanthropy.

CT is well-positioned to start this important work because, according to the State Department of Education, the state already tracks attendance and absences in our longitudinal student data systems. The State is poised to turn the curve on chronic absenteeism as a strategy to close the achievement gap and improve student outcomes generally. By codifying these best practices, we are taking a great “next step” in improving educational outcomes for our children.

I have attached the substance of the Commission’s recommendation to my testimony, and would be honored to assist the Committee as it moves forward with its deliberation.

In support of Senate Bill 25, I would like to incorporate by reference testimony provided in support of codifying an Office of Early Childhood, as presented by my Executive Director, Elaine Zimmerman before the Appropriations Committee on Monday, February 24, 2014. I have attached that testimony to my own in our submission.

In Support of House Bill 5355, I would like to incorporate by reference testimony I provided in support of the concept of MOUs between schools and local law enforcement to define the role law enforcement personnel as school resource officers in schools. We especially support the promotion of a graduated response model for student discipline in such memoranda. I’ve also attached that testimony to today’s submission for your reference.

With 9.4 percent of high school students nationwide reporting being hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the 12 months prior to the survey,¹ and with more and more internet users ages 10-17 saying they have been the victim of “on-line harassment,” defined as threats or other offensive behavior sent on-line to someone or posted on-line,² we support the purposes behind Senate Bill 282 and House Bill 5356, respectively.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be honored to address any questions the Committee may have, or to provide further data or documentation “off-line.”

¹ http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teen_dating_violence.html.

² <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ea-brief-a.pdf>.

DRAFT: REFORMING ABSENTEE POLICY IN THE STATE OF CT

An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism.

Section 1. (Effective from passage) (a) As used in this section:

(1) “Chronic absentee” means a child age three to four, inclusive, who is enrolled in a preschool program, or a child age five to eighteen, inclusive, who is enrolled in a public school, who is chronically absent.

(2) “Chronic absence” means absence for ten percent (10%) or more of the days enrolled in a school year for any reason, including as a result of school or district disciplinary action, or as a result of a change of schools.

(b) (1) The State Department of Education, in consultation with the Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap, the Office of Early Childhood, and the School Readiness Councils shall develop a chronic absenteeism prevention and early intervention plan, along with a statewide implementation timeline for said plan, as defined in subparagraph (2) of this paragraph, to assist preschools, school districts and schools in successfully addressing chronic absence pre-k through 12 inclusive.

(2) (A) A chronic absenteeism prevention and early intervention plan shall include, but need not be limited to, the following: (i) An information strategy to engage families, community, and students on what chronic absence is, why regular attendance matters for success in school, and how strong school, community and family partnerships can improve student attendance. Such strategy may include collaboration with community partners, such as family resource centers and the youth service bureaus, to reach and engage families as partners in an attendance improvement plan, link families and students to existing community resources that address the root causes of absenteeism, such as poverty, violence, poor health, and lack of reliable transportation; and (ii) Infrastructure and technical support to enable consistent and accurate attendance data collection disaggregated by school, grade and subgroups, including race, gender, free or reduced lunch, and ELL. Such data shall be used by each school to develop “early warning” flags to identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism; monitor students’ progress and adjust interventions in real time; and track prior year chronic absence to target chronic absentees at the beginning of each new school year;

(B) A chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan may include the following: (i) A School Attendance Review Team whose purpose is to address chronic absenteeism. This can be an existing team and must include the following individuals: a school administrator, a guidance counselor, a school social worker, a teacher and, to the extent possible, the parent or guardian. The team must meet at least weekly to review the cases of

chronically absent students, to discuss school interventions, community referrals, and any additional recommendations for the student and family. (ii) Incentives and rewards to recognize schools and students that improve attendance, which may be in collaboration with the private sector and philanthropy. (iii) A research-based, data-driven mentorship model that seeks to prevent and address chronic absenteeism, which may include trained external, internal or peer mentors. “External” mentors may include existing or newly recruited non-profit school partners; “Internal” school mentors may include teachers, coaches and security officers; and “peer” mentors may include supervised high school seniors; and

(c) Not later than February 1, 2015, the Department of Education and the Office of Early Childhood shall each submit and present a status report on the progress of the chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan required under paragraphs (b)(1) and (2) in this section, respectively, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the Governor and the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children and education.

(d) On or before October 1, 2015, the Department of Education and the Office of Early Childhood shall each submit and present a chronic absenteeism prevention and early intervention plan required under paragraphs (b)(1) and (2) in this section, respectively, in accordance with section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the Governor and the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children and education.

Sec. 2. Amend Sec. 10-151b. Evaluation by superintendents of certain education personnel. Teacher evaluation programs. Guidelines for a model teacher evaluation and support program. (a) The superintendent of each local or regional board of education shall annually evaluate or cause to be evaluated each teacher, in accordance with guidelines established by the State Board of Education, pursuant to subsection (c) of this section, and such other guidelines as may be established by mutual agreement between the local or regional board of education and the teachers’ representative chosen pursuant to section 10-153b, and may conduct additional formative evaluations toward producing an annual summative evaluation. An evaluation pursuant to this subsection shall include, but need not be limited to, strengths, areas needing improvement, strategies for improvement and multiple indicators of student academic growth. Claims of failure to follow the established procedures of such evaluation and support programs shall be subject to the grievance procedure in collective bargaining agreements negotiated subsequent to July 1, 2004. In the event that a teacher does not receive a summative evaluation during the school year, such teacher shall receive a “not rated” designation for such school year. The superintendent shall report the status of teacher evaluations to the local or regional board of education on or before June first of each year. For purposes of this section, the term “teacher” shall include each professional employee of a

board of education, below the rank of superintendent, who holds a certificate or permit issued by the State Board of Education.

(b) (1) Except as provided in subsection (d) of this section, not later than September 1, 2013, each local and regional board of education shall develop and implement teacher evaluation programs consistent with guidelines adopted by the State Board of Education, pursuant to subsection (c) of this section, and consistent with the plan developed in accordance with the provisions of subsection (b) of section 10-220a.

(2) Not later than June thirtieth of each year, each superintendent shall report to the Commissioner of Education the status of the implementation of teacher evaluations, including the frequency of evaluations, aggregate evaluation ratings, the number of teachers who have not been evaluated and other requirements as determined by the Department of Education.

(c) On or before July 1, 2012, the State Board of Education shall adopt, in consultation with the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council established pursuant to section 10-151d, guidelines for a model teacher evaluation and support program. Such guidelines shall include, but not be limited to, (1) the use of four performance evaluations designators: Exemplary, proficient, developing and below standard; (2) the use of multiple indicators of student academic growth and development in teacher evaluations; (3) methods for assessing student academic growth and development; (4) a consideration of control factors tracked by the state-wide public school information system, pursuant to subsection (c) of section 10-10a, that may influence teacher performance ratings, including, but not limited to student mobility; (5) minimum requirements for teacher evaluation instruments and procedures, including scoring systems to determine exemplary, proficient, developing and below standard ratings; (6) the development and implementation of periodic training programs regarding the teacher evaluation and support program to be offered by the local or regional board of education or regional educational service center for the school district to teachers who are employed by such local or regional board of education and whose performance is being evaluated and to administrators who are employed by such local or regional board of education and who are conducting performance evaluations; (7) the provision of professional development services based on the individual or group of individuals' needs that are identified through the evaluation process; (8) the creation of individual teacher improvement and remediation plans for teachers whose performance is developing or below standard, designed in consultation with such teacher and his or her exclusive bargaining representative for certified teachers chosen pursuant to section 10-153b, and that (A) identify resources, support and other strategies to be provided by the local or regional board of education to address documented deficiencies, (B) indicate a timeline for implementing such resources, support, and other strategies, in the course of the same school year as the plan is issued, and (C) include indicators of success

including a summative rating of proficient or better immediately at the conclusion of the improvement and remediation plan; (9) opportunities for career development and professional growth; and (10) a validation procedure to audit evaluation ratings of exemplary or below standard by the department, or a third-party entity approved by the department, to validate such exemplary or below standard evaluation ratings. The State Board of Education, following the completion of the teacher evaluation and support pilot program, pursuant to section 10-151f, and the submission of the study of such pilot program, pursuant to section 10-151g, shall validate the guidelines adopted under this subsection.

(d) The State Board of Education may waive the provisions of subdivision (1) of subsection (b) of this section for any local or regional board of education that has developed a teacher evaluation program prior to the validation of the model teacher evaluation and support program guidelines described in subsection (c) of this section and that the State Board of Education determines is in substantial compliance with such model teacher evaluation and support program guidelines.

Senator bye, Representative Walker and members of the Committee,

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the CT Commission on Children and am here today to speak on the Governor's Budget and S.B. 25, An Act Establishing the Office of Early Childhood.

Our state began school readiness policy with attention to low-income children in our poorest cities. The focus was on access, quality and supply. In 1997, our state stood out. We were the only state assuring care for both threes and four year olds, combining dollars between social services and education. We developed local school readiness councils and assured accreditation for school readiness slots. But the overall initiative was based on programs. It was not systemic, across all early care programs.

SB25 takes what our state began and brings it from program policy to a comprehensive system. The Office of Early Childhood brings all the programs serving young children together. It offers a continuum of services from birth to age eight, creates a coordinated early care and education system, and assures our teachers are well-trained and educated. It begins a data and accountability plan, oversees safety standards and the integration of home visitation and early care. This is the whole house approach.

Similarly, the Governor's budget offers more inspectors, provider rate increases, professional development, and quality enhancements. The budget and legislation begin to create a seamless system for young children, with growth and quality. The latter is imperative as early care and education is not, in and of itself, a panacea. Poor early care can do harm and good care helps children thrive.

Early care and education programs, if they are of quality, are equalizers. They level the skills set for formal schooling. The gap in achievement between low-income children and their middle-class peers is real and significant.

- Before entering kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of preschool-age children in the highest socioeconomic group are 60 percent above the average scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group.
- At age 4 years, children who live below the poverty line are 18 months below what is normal for their age group; by age 10 that gap is still present. For children living in the poorest families, the gap is even larger.
- By the time children from middle-income families with well-educated parents are in third grade, they know about 12,000 words. Third grade children from low-income families with undereducated parents who don't talk to them very much have vocabularies of around 4,000 words, one-third as many words as their middle-income peers.

All children should have access to good care while their parents work or job train. But not all do. Often parents need to rely on neighbors, boyfriends, or older children to create a patchwork system of care.

Oral language development and pre-literacy are the bridge and precursors to language skills development in kindergarten and first grade. Yet, some children have families where reading together is not the daily norm due to language differences, level of adult literacy, and time shortages, juggling a few jobs to make ends meet.

Before entering formal education, children should:

- Have more than 1000 hours of experience with books, alphabet games, storybook reading and activities;
- Have been included in conversation and treated as successful speakers and listeners;
- Have engaged in playtime that employs symbols such as acting out roles, designing stories and using props;
- Be exposed to print and writing in their daily life.

Without the quality environments in child care where teachers are reading to children, the divide between those who have and those that do not, increases.

There is mounting evidence that intervention beginning during infancy or preschool age, has a greater impact on child outcomes and families than beginning to provide services at school age (Barnett and Escobar, 1990). In spite of federal mandates for early intervention, limitations in the identification process, diminish access to services (Meisels and Wasik), 1990).

Nationally, 11% of school age children receive special education services, 4.9% of preschool children receive special education services and only 1.6% of infants and toddlers receive early intervention services. These statistics indicate a significant need to improve early identification of children who are likely to require special education at school age. In spite of federal legislation for early intervention, we are not reaching most of the children and families who need help as early as we should.

There are other challenges to quality and supply. In some CT cities, a shortage of space and buildings exist, limiting access to care. Though our standards for early care are excellent, our oversight of the standards have ironically, been very poor. This has created opportunity for safety hazards and poor practices to prevail. We have not been visiting early care sites at least once a year, and studies have shown serious danger to young children.

A few suggestions:

- Build in explicit information for parents on choices and on quality. Let them know how they can partner with early care. Recent focus groups with families, performed by the Governor's Early Care and Education Cabinet, inform us that parents, in general, do not know about the resources available or how to choose good care from poor care, though every parent cares.
- Address English Language learners. With our growing demographics, there is no reference to ELL in this bill. Many families will simply not send their children to quality programs if the cultural sensitivity and language barriers are not met.

- Increase wages a bit further, if possible. Many providers leave the field to take other employment due to the low wages. In fact, when early care providers are trained, they often rapidly move into the public school system to garner improved salary and benefits. In other words, with quality training, we lose a large workforce. If we expect our providers to have a Bachelors Degree by 2020, we will need to raise wages further.
- Assure parity across systems. State funded centers need a bit more resources to be on a level playing field with the school readiness programs. About \$500,000 should be added to the Child Care Services line item, as the calculation factored in only 1/2 the total allocation to the State Funded Centers and did not include the half coming from a federal block grant.
- Make sure our early care providers are substantively trained in developmentally appropriate early literacy and math skills. With the largest achievement gap in reading in the states, we can be improving curriculum practice in pre-k as well as in our kindergarten through grade three classrooms. There is evidence across early learning settings that all children who are behind can make gains when they have teachers who know how to actively involve children in learning and have the appropriate supports.
- Consider a two generational strategy. Research shows that working on school readiness and workforce readiness together helps the whole family. Given that the number one indicator of a child's literacy is the literacy of the mother, we should consider adult education, GED and community college strategies for the early care children's parents. This would both help with poverty reduction and with optimal child development. Our TANF funds are allowable for this.
- Assure the bridge between infant toddler programming and preschool. Integrate training of home visitors and early care providers, where possible, so the field is better aligned and skills are learned for different ages and stages of a young child's development. Education reform efforts need to start as early as birth, and be continued through preschool.
- Develop preschool to grade three work around specific policies such as the achievement gap, social emotional behavior, executive functioning, early language and vocabulary. With a policy theme that is key to children's learning and that all teachers could put their arms around , the early care and kindergarten through grade three fields could be better aligned. An intentional curriculum is an important component of quality early learning and most effective when it is consistent with district-wide kindergarten through third grade (K-3) professional development activities and early learning standards.

- Weave the early care provider into the evolving focus and training on the achievement gap. It is not clear that the early care provider understands the impact of poverty, institutional racism or family stressors. Teachers need to have hands-on professional development and ongoing supports to better interact with low-income children to promote early learning.
- Assure full day kindergarten in the four Alliance districts that do not yet have full day kindergarten. As a pre k to third grade policy, we do our children poorly if they go from full day preschool to two hours of kindergarten.
- Stop parents from holding back their children from kindergarten to gain the edge in academics and sports. The issue in kindergarten is less the month of starting than the fact that parents who have resources choose to hold their children back so they are the smartest and the best athletes. Families who are poor must send their children to kindergarten because they cannot afford the early care alternative. So poor children are always the youngest. We need to disallow this, as New York State has done and limit the age that one can be in kindergarten on the back end, not at the front end.
- Utilize TANF dollars more aggressively for both school readiness and workforce readiness. I enclose a summary of our use of dollars and the opportunities that we do not fully utilize.

Closing the achievement gap is a large task requiring strategic planning and action at the classroom, local, state, and federal levels. For children in the highest-risk families and poorest communities, even the best early care and early learning opportunities will not be enough to help them perform on a level consistent with their more advantaged peers until there is a coordinated system, from infancy to grade three, of high expectations, shared training and quality throughout.

Thank you for your time.

Testimony

January 25, 2013

Honorable Chairs and Members of the School Security Working Group [of the Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention & Children's Safety]:

My name is Steven Hernández. I am the Attorney for the CT Commission on Children. Thank you for the opportunity to present the Commission's testimony on the issue of school security and children's safety.

Today you will hear recommendations on various ways to address school security and child safety in our schools in light of Newtown. The Commission's testimony will focus on the potential role of the school resource officer ("the SRO") in helping to create more secure and safer schools.

Specifically, we will speak to (1) the renewed interest, as you've heard today, in many communities for an SRO presence in their schools, (2) challenges that may arise as a result, (3) and ways to mitigate those challenges based on local and national best-practices.

While police officers have long played an educational and security role in Connecticut communities, often including our schools in their "beat" or foot patrol, the modern SRO emerged in the mid-90s as a result of the federal and state response to increased drug and weapons violations in our schools. These laws, such as the 1994 Gun Free School Act, were collectively known as zero-tolerance policies.

These SROs first came to Connecticut as a result of federal grants stemming from those policies. After Columbine, the Clinton administration created the

COPS in Schools grant program to provide federal dollars for local SRO funding. According to Department of Justice sources, during that time period Connecticut received more than \$9 million over the next several years to pay for a cadre of SROs throughout the state.

During that time, the role of the SRO was loosely defined and communities took very different approaches on how they utilized officers in schools, and the officers' roles as law enforcement. According to the Justice Policy Institute, in communities where SROs were simply extensions of the police house in the school, SROs began to apply zero-tolerance policies to all types of behaviors, with draconian punishments meted across the board, including for lesser infractions such as fights.

According to the ACLU, without "clearly defined objectives that are well understood by all stakeholders; adequate training requirements; and periodic outcome-based monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that permit program administrators and the public to gauge SRO programs' performance accurately" an SRO presence in schools simply resulted in more arrests and increase introduction of children into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Any consideration of increasing police presence in our schools should take into account the complex relationship identity of the resource officer as a school professional and as a law enforcement officer. At an unprecedented Senate hearing on ending the school-to-prison pipeline, the American Psychological Association and the Council of State Governments, among others, identified the links between exclusionary discipline and students being held back a grade, dropping out, and coming into contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems. These impacts are often disproportionately experience by minority students.

In 2008, the ACLU and the ACLU of Connecticut reviewed the SRO programs in three Connecticut Towns: Hartford, East Hartford and West Hartford. In essence the report "revealed structural problems likely to diminish SRO program performance, as well as troubling school-based arrest practices in all three districts."

Specifically, the report found that at the time SROs in West Hartford and Hartford were not subject to any agreement of what their role was in the community of promoting school safety. In East Hartford, where a memorandum of understanding was in place which defined the role of the SRO in school, there was limited awareness of its requirements among the officers or staff. ACLU.

The report also found that that school resource officers in all three jurisdictions received uneven training, even where required, and all three districts failed to keep adequate arrest data, making program evaluation impossible.

In the three schools studied by the ACLU, this led to an increase in school-based arrests, higher out-of-school suspension rates. The report further found that these impacts were experienced disproportionately by minority youth.

"In West Hartford and East Hartford, students of color were arrested at school at a rate far out of proportion to their numbers. In 2006-07, for example, African American and Hispanic students together accounted for 69 percent of East Hartford's student population, but experienced 85 percent of its school-based arrests. Likewise, the same year, in West Hartford, African

American and Hispanic students accounted for 24 percent of the population, but experienced 63 percent of arrests.

In West Hartford and East Hartford, students of color committing certain common disciplinary infractions are more likely to be arrested than are white students committing the very same offenses. For example, over the two years for which data are available, African American students involved in physical altercations at school in West Hartford were about twice as likely to be arrested as similarly situated white students.

And during the same time period, in East Hartford, both African American and Hispanic students involved in disciplinary incidents involving drugs, alcohol, or tobacco were ten times more likely to be arrested than were similarly situated white students.

In early 2010, the General Assembly began to grapple with some of these disparities and need for training and considered legislation to require a state-driven a plan for a school resource officer training in:

- the role and responsibility of school resource officers
- relevant state and federal laws
- security awareness in the school environment
- counseling, mediation and conflict resolution
- disaster and emergency response
- deescalation of student behavior, including, but not limited to, students with behavioral health and special education needs
- child and adolescent psychology and development,
- cultural competence, and
- gender-responsive strategies.

More recently, Court support services, the State Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education, funded the School-Based Diversion Initiative, which trains school staff on behavioral interventions and how to recognize mental health issues instead of resorting to law enforcement. Hartford joined three other communities across the state in agreeing to reduce the number of city students who are arrested at school for minor offenses.

Hartford's agreement is based on a model memorandum of understanding that has been distributed by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, a panel under the state Office of Policy and Management that has been among several groups aiming to reform the juvenile justice system in Connecticut. This initiative is being implemented at Hartford Public and Weaver Schools this year, after being implemented in communities such as Bridgeport, East Hartford and Southington.

These MOUs outline a graduated response model in which schools "should involve the police as a last line of defense" after first opting for in-school intervention for misbehavior such as defying school rules, truancy and harassment.

Communities such as Hartford which have used these agreements in creating relationship with school resource officers have experienced a dramatic drop in school-based arrests.

President Obama's preliminary recommendations after Newtown include a renewed plan to incentivize local police departments to train and hire SROs. Throughout Connecticut, we have also seen a renewed interest in the SRO

model. This is not surprising in light of recent events in Newtown and across the country.

While the evidence shows that SROs can help improve school climate and safety when they form part of a community of school safety and they are trained to act first as a "teacher, "counselor," and as a last resort as a "law enforcer", simply placing **more** police officers in our schools is not the answer.

After the tragedy at Newtown, Superior Court Judge Carol A. Wolven, chief administrative judge of juvenile matters, and a member of the Commission on Children, reported to the Commission that there had been a sharp increase in school-based arrests for relatively minor infractions. She noted that an unfortunate response to the insecurity created by the Newtown shooting was a spike in the number of children entering the system that simply "shouldn't be there."

Renewed interest in the role of the SRO in promoting positive and secure school climate and children's safety, should be seen as an opportunity for the state to revisit best practices for promoting positive school climate and security at our schools, such as those proposed in the 2010 bill on school resource officers and the School-Based Diversion Initiative, while avoiding some of the pitfalls historically associated with having police officers in schools.

Conclusion

The National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention states the challenge succinctly. In order to partner successfully

with school resource officers we need to "understand the challenges that exist when it comes to law enforcement working in partnership with schools. Because law enforcement and school personnel differ in so many ways, they face challenges in the areas of communications, perception, roles, responsibilities, and data sharing."

"The challenge of school safety belongs to the community." With a renewed commitment to in-school discipline and interventions as alternatives to arrest, and proper training and resources for SROs, we can ensure the school resource officer plays a productive role in improving student climate and security in our schools.

As the ACLU recommended in its report on SROs in three of our towns, School resource officer programs should include MOUs that outline clear objectives on the role of SROs in schools; ensure adequate training, including training in counseling, mediation, child and adolescent psychology, cultural competence, and applicable legal principles; and mechanisms to monitor and evaluate performance.

Concurrent to buttressing the positive role of the SRO in the school safety and security community, communities should invest in and expand preventive steps such as positive behavioral intervention and supports, addressing the disproportionate targeting of vulnerable populations, and improve data collection and transparency.