



Testimony, March 17, 2014 – Michael McGuire

## HOUSE BILL 5567 – AAC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Domus, a Stamford-based nonprofit, has operated schools for high-need, traumatized youth since 1999; I started at Domus that year as a social studies teacher after a successful career in the financial services industry. These middle and high schoolers have faced many barriers to academic success; many are on the path to dropping out of school or have already done so prior to coming to Domus.

Our student populations are similar to those of urban alternative programs; in fact, many Domus youth have *been* in those programs. How good or bad are those educational programs? It's hard to know, which is why this bill has been proposed. What we do know is that a patchwork of educational quality exists regarding curricula in use, teacher oversight and quality, number of classroom hours, quality and frequency of assessment, and more. Worst of all, taxpayers and lawmakers alike have no data on the results these programs get.

What students are in these programs? Youth already at high risk of not graduating or graduating with a meaningless diploma: kids without the financial resources to get private help...youth who've dealt with significant life challenges which have physically changed their brains...young people who, for a variety of reasons, lack the emotional skills to cope with the chronic stress in their lives in healthy ways. In short, our state's most vulnerable youth.

But improving the education of these youth yields tremendous benefits for them, their families, and the communities where they choose to live as adults. Ensuring these children are literate and have a high school diploma means they can get and keep a job paying a livable wage: They can provide for themselves, and for their families—they can pay taxes and lead satisfying lives...lives that improve the economic state of our towns and cities...lives with the capacity to be happy and to end the cycle of poverty.

This year, sixth graders entered our Stamford middle school reading, on average, below a third grade level. One third were four grades behind. The ninth graders at our high school were just as far behind. Dozens of children on the verge of entering adulthood without the skills to hold even the most simple, undemanding job—and those are just the children we can accommodate in two small schools in one city.

Domus runs our full-day high school for under \$20,000 per student. It's expensive because these students come to us with massive academic deficits and suffering from the effects of deep trauma. But it's *still* cheaper than what other alternative programs spend per student for a far less comprehensive approach. We're proving you can provide an affordable and effective full-day program with robust social and emotional supports; money can no longer be an excuse. We should do better for these kids to save money now and in the future, and we should do it because it's just and fair: These students, like every other child, have the right to a quality education.