

**Testimony of Leon Smith, J.D. on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy In Support of  
Raised Bill 5567: An Act Concerning Alternative Schools  
Education Committee  
March 17, 2014**

To the chairpersons and members of the Education Committee, I submit this testimony on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit organization affiliated with the University Of Connecticut School Of Law in support of Raised Bill 5567. The Center provides legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. I am the Director of the Center's Alternative Schools Project, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Our aim is to promote positive reform to the alternative education system to ensure that all students receive appropriate educational services, increasing the percentage of youth who graduate from high school and improving overall educational achievement and outcomes.

To that end, I spent the last year visiting alternative school programs across the state, speaking with students, parents, administrators, faculty, staff and community providers about their experiences with alternative schools and programs. I have also acted as educational advocate for students placed in alternative school settings. Based upon these experiences, we strongly feel that alternative school programs in Connecticut are in need of reform. To that end, we support Raised Bill 5567 for the following reasons:

**1. Raised Bill 5567 defines alternative school programs, and requires the State Department of Education to provide guidelines for districts in creating these programs.**

Alternative schools and programs are not currently defined by statute and there are also no guidelines available to provide guidance to school districts in creating these programs, establishing the standards these programs should meet or the target population these programs should serve. Districts should have parameters to ensure that these programs are geared towards meeting the needs of this class of students.

**Sections 1 and 2 of this Bill** addresses the lack of definition of alternative school programs and the lack of guidance to school districts by:

- Defining alternative schools and programs as a school or program offered by a local or regional board of education that's designed to serve the educational needs of students outside of a regular classroom setting or general education program.
- Requiring the State Department of Education, by July 1, 2015, to develop alternative school program guidelines for the purpose of assisting local and regional boards of education in providing these educational settings.

**2. Raised Bill 5567 requires data and information about alternative school programs to be made public, providing oversight on the performance of these schools and needed information to parents and students across the state.**

Alternative schools in Connecticut have essentially been "invisible". While regular public schools are required to provide the State Department of Education (SDE) with data and information that is made public, such as test scores, attendance, instructional hours and course offerings, alternative schools are not subject to these requirements. This has created a significant data gap which leaves alternative school programs without appropriate oversight and parents and students without readily available information about their quality.

- The SDE report showed that 84% of alternative school programs do not have “organization codes” which are used in state reporting systems. This means that information about these school programs, and their students, are not known to the State Department of Education.<sup>1</sup>
- This data gap is exacerbated by the inconsistency in reporting on student enrollment, as some districts report alternative school program students as still enrolled at their home public school while others report the student as enrolled at the alternative program.
- Truancy in the mainstream public school system is often a reason why students are referred to an alternative school program, yet there is often little emphasis on reducing truancy within these programs. Alternative programs in some of Alliance Districts showed an average daily attendance below 50%. Yet, data collection by SDE only shows the average student enrollment over an entire year, leaving open the possibility that students who stop attending and drop out are not being counted.
- The SDE report shows the need for ongoing reporting in order to ensure transparency. Without it, there will once again be a lack of comprehensive data regarding students in alternative schools and the quality of their learning experience.

**Sections 1(c), 4(c) and 13 of this Bill** ensures better oversight of alternative school programs by mandating:

- Each school district to provide information relating to alternative school programs on the board's web site.
- The superintendent of each local and regional board of education to annually submit to SDE information on alternative school programs.

**3. Raised Bill 5567 will help ensure that alternative school programs provide a quality educational experience that is comparable to their public school counterparts**

There are alternative school programs that do not offer the same number of class hours or the same course offerings as mainstream public schools, resulting in an inferior educational experience and creating the potential for these settings to become “dumping grounds” for vulnerable students and the first stop on the road to school drop-out.

- According to the SDE report, at least 10% of students in alternative and dropout diversion programs don’t receive the minimum 900 hours of instruction.<sup>2</sup>
- In several Alliance Districts, students in alternative and dropout prevention programs are receiving up to 2.75 hours fewer hours of instruction than their public school counterparts.<sup>3</sup>
- The impact of fewer hours has been cited by parents for not only impeding the academic progress of their children, but leaving them with significant idle time without school or activities, creating the potential for negative outcomes. One Alliance District city whose alternative program provides fewer than 900 hours of instruction has seen a significant number of juvenile arrests during school hours (8 am – 3 pm).

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<sup>1</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education, Report on the Study of Alternative School Programs, p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education, Report on the Study of Alternative School Programs, p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Center for Children’s Advocacy, Alternative Schools and Programs: Views from the Inside, The Need for Systemic Review and Reform in Connecticut, p. 6 ([www.kidscounsel.org](http://www.kidscounsel.org))

**Section 1(a) of this Bill** addresses the inferior quality of many of many of these school programs by **requiring:**

- That students in alternative school programs to receive the same minimum number of school sessions and hours of school work and the same minimum program of instruction as traditional public schools pursuant to §10-15, 10-16 and 10-16b of the general statutes.

**4. Raised Bill 5567 will ensure informed parental consent and involvement before a student's admission, which will safeguard against students being "pushed out" into these programs.**

There is not a defined process for how students enter and exit alternative school programs. While districts report that parental involvement is very high, there have been complaints from parents that their children have been counseled, coerced and involuntarily placed in alternative school programs.

- Students have a legal right to remain in public high school until the age of 21, but many as young as 16 with histories of truancy, academic and discipline problems are told by school personnel that high school "isn't working" and that they must attend an alternative school program;
- Some schools fail to disclose the information required for the student and parent to make an informed decision or even misrepresent the law by conveying that they have no other choice.
  - Parents who did not speak or read English were given papers, without explanation of what they were or the rights the student was entitled to, and told that they had to sign.<sup>4</sup>

**Section 1(b) of this Bill** helps ensure that placements into alternative programs are voluntary and appropriate by **requiring:**

- The informed parental consent for the placement in the alternative school program prior to referral.

**5. Raised Bill 5567 will ensure that expelled students receive quality education opportunities and maintain progress towards graduation**

Many expelled students in Connecticut receive very little support and inferior education opportunities during their period of expulsion. The vast majority of districts only offer two hours a day of tutoring in a community setting to expelled students eligible for an alternative educational opportunity. Very often, these tutoring programs are flawed in that districts take weeks to connect students with tutors, and tutors can be very unreliable in their quality and hours of instruction

**Section 1(b) of this Bill** will improve the quality of education for these students by **mandating:**

- Eligible students to be placed in an alternative school program provided in accordance with the statute's definition.

**6. Certain modifications, as set forth below, would further strengthen alternative school programs across the state:**

Amending the provisions of **Section 3(a)** of the bill to expressly apply to alternative school programs would address the many alternative schools that sit in dilapidated settings without adequate materials, staffing and resources to meet the needs students who are often the most vulnerable in their respective school districts. Additionally, amending **Sections 1(b) (3) and 6(d)** of this bill to remove adult education as an alternative educational opportunity for high school age youth would keep high school aged students in their school systems with better resources and support services rather than being pushed into adult education settings that are not generally equipped to meet their needs.

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<sup>4</sup> See "Invisible Students", p. 38

Thank you very much for your time and attention to these very important issues impacting the quality of education for our youth.

Respectfully submitted by:

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