

March 12, 2014

General Assembly
Education Committee
Room 3100, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

RE: S.B. No. 425 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE EDUCATION RESOURCE CENTER.

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Patrice Peterson and I'm the president of CSEA SEIU Local 2001, a union that represents 27,500 plus, state, municipal and private sector employees and retirees across the state of Connecticut. I'm also a special education teacher for the Department of Developmental Services. CSEA represents Education Administrators who are part of the state's P3A bargaining unit. On behalf of CSEA's members in the P3A bargaining unit, I submit the following testimony opposing Senate Bill 425.

Education Administrators in the P3A bargaining unit are an important and key component in Connecticut's education infrastructure. P3A members are education consultants who, among many other work functions, supervise training programs for school teachers, administrators, professional staff and paraprofessionals; provide oversight for school construction projects; and administer many federal and state funded programs for the State Department of Education (SDE). Many P3A members have terminal degrees and are nationally known for their leadership and expertise.

By all appearances, Senate Bill 425 will legitimize the outsourcing of P3A bargaining unit work to the State Education Resource Center (SERC). By establishing the State Education Resource Center as a "quasi-public agency", Senate Bill 425 risks turning SERC into a shadow agency not subject to the same level of oversight, transparency and accountability as other state agencies. Maybe that is the intent. **In its present form we cannot support this legislation.**

The bill raises many questions. For instance, will SERC contracts with CSDE fall under the review and oversight powers of the State Contracting Standards Board? Does the legislation legitimize CSDE's transfer of federal and state grant funds to SERC, amounting to more than 12.8 million dollars, for work which is already done by members of the P3A bargaining unit? Does Senate Bill 425 change the current scope of SERC's programmatic activity? It appears that the answer to all these questions is 'yes'.

SERC was originally created in 1969 to "assist the State Board of Education in the provision of programs and activities that will promote educational equity and excellence." SERC's work was predominantly limited to issues impacting students with special needs. It was not created and should not be modified to act as a parallel entity to the types of educational work currently performed by state employees. This duplicity is even evident in the job titles for SERC's professional staff, which mirror the P3A bargaining unit (e.g. Education Consultants, Education Service Specialist).

There are several examples on the face of the bill of P3A work being needlessly duplicated at the wasteful
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expense of taxpayer dollars. Section 2(b) calls for SERC to establish the “Connecticut School Reform Resource Center.” The listed functions of the Center describe work P3A members already do in the Turnaround Office of SDE.

Moreover, Section 2(a) permits SERC to “support programs and activities concerning early childhood education.” This suggests that SERC may position itself to compete for the federal and state dollars earmarked for early childhood professional development and training. The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood was established in 2013 to coordinate and improve the various early education programs and components in the state in order to create a cohesive high-quality early childhood system. Therefore, SERC also displays redundancy with the Office of Early Childhood.

Every education professional has a vested interest in providing the best services to the students and the families of Connecticut. We want to help children learn; assist teachers, administrators, professional staff and paraprofessionals in improving their skill set; and work with parents and communities to build schools in which teaching and learning occurs. However, nobody wants to see Connecticut turn SERC into something that operates outside established and respected parameters. With that status they will be functioning without the level of transparency required of all state agencies. Additionally, in these trying financial times, using taxpayer dollars to fund action which is already performed by state employees is unacceptable.

CSEA members are eager and ready to work with members of the Education Committee to improve this piece of legislation and the effectiveness of SERC. We recommend the General Assembly establish a committee (legislators, educators, administrators, parents, CSEA members, community members) with membership beyond CSDE to further study viable options that are cost-effective, efficient, transparent and accountable for SERC.

At CSEA, we are committed to ensuring that Connecticut schools are a model for the nation.

In aid of that commitment, CSEA also supports H.B. No. 5523 (RAISED) AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE TO STUDY PARAPROFESSIONAL STAFFING LEVELS.

Patrice Peterson
President, CSEA SEIU Local 2001