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Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 54, An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel

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Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Sandra Staub. I'm legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut and I'm here to support Senate Bill 54, An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel.

The ACLU of Connecticut has long been concerned about the criminalization of typical student misbehavior, and our concern has grown as more police officers have been assigned to patrol schools. Many studies have shown that when police officers are assigned as school resource officers, student arrest rates increase dramatically. A September 2013 report by Connecticut Voices for Children found that many students in our state have been arrested at school for behaviors that were not criminal—such as skipping class, insubordination and swearing.¹ These are matters that school administrators have traditionally handled, and should continue to handle, as routine disciplinary matters.

Particularly troubling are the racial and ethnic disparities in school-based arrests. The same study found that African American students were 3.7 times and Hispanic students 3.2 times more likely to be arrested than white students. The punishment for a given offense varies widely from town to town and even among individual schools in some communities. This reinforces the findings of our 2008 study, *Hard Lessons: School Resource Officer Programs and School-Based Arrests in Three Connecticut Towns*, which also found that the rate of arrest for students of color was alarmingly higher than the rate of arrest for white students.²

We support this bill because it provides a path to fixing these problems through MOUs, or memoranda of understanding, between boards of education and school resource officers. These agreements set clear guidelines for the daily interactions that law enforcement officers have with students and school personnel. They establish a graduated response model for student discipline that distinguishes between crimes that police will handle and disciplinary matters that school officials will deal with administratively. Memoranda of understanding have proven to be extremely effective. After the school systems in Hartford and Bridgeport adopted memoranda of understanding with police, they experienced reductions of 44 percent and 31 percent, respectively, in school-based arrests, according to

¹ <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/arresting-development-student-arrests-connecticut>

² <http://www.acluct.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/hardlessons.pdf>

the Center for Children's Advocacy.³ The diversion of children away from the entrance to what we call the school-to-prison pipeline is good for everyone – the children, the schools, the criminal justice system and society in general.

The reporting requirements in this bill are also sensible and well-considered. The state Department of Education will report annually on school-based arrests with details about race, ethnicity, gender, age, student disabilities and the type of offense for which the arrest was made, with the statistics broken down by individual schools. This analysis will provide the Department of Education, the legislature, school officials and the communities they serve with the means to evaluate how our schools are policed and the impact on our children.

Last year we testified in favor of legislation that was substantially the same as this bill and which had widespread support not only among advocates for children, juvenile justice and civil liberties but among law enforcement and school officials. The police chiefs of Hartford, Bridgeport and Manchester supported it based on the improvements that memoranda of understanding brought to their communities. It passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 114 to 20. Unfortunately, it did not reach the floor of the Senate. Fortunately, you have another chance. I urge you to enact Senate Bill 54.

³ <http://www.kidscounsel.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/SB-54-AAC-Collaboration-Fact-Sheet-final.pdf>