



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

**TESTIMONY OF GREATER HARTFORD LEGAL AID, INC. IN SUPPORT OF S.B. 54, AAC COLLABORATION
BETWEEN BOARDS OF EDUCATION AND LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL**

Good afternoon, Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Lynn Cochrane and I am a staff attorney in the education unit of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc., a non-profit legal services office representing low-income persons in Hartford County for over 50 years. Greater Hartford Legal Aid strongly urges this committee to support S.B. 54, An Act Concerning Collaboration between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel.

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance and the Center for Children's Advocacy speak very persuasively about the problem of and proposed solutions to excessive school-based arrests in Connecticut. Their testimony is borne out by what we see in our daily work. GHLA has represented many hundreds of parents and their children in special education and discipline matters, with the goal of increasing each student's successful academic and behavioral progress in school. The vast majority of our clients are black or Hispanic. Time and again, clients have been arrested for minor problems in which no one is hurt, no property is damaged, and yet, with a school resource officer on the premises, an arrest seems to be the way to quickly solve the problem.

In the recent past, we have seen how changes to our suspension law have reduced the numbers of out-of-school suspensions. It is unclear whether these reductions would have happened without the law changing to make out-of-school suspension become the discipline response of last resort. In all likelihood, not so soon or easily. Similarly, we must change the law to reduce school-based arrests. Exhortation by itself is not enough. Data from the State Department of Education show that some cities, such as East Hartford, have over the past few years reduced their suspensions and expulsions significantly, which is a tremendous improvement. Yet, inexplicably, their numbers of school-based arrests of black and Hispanic students have risen. Arrests of disabled students have risen even more. Arrests of white students, however, are down. This terrible problem is too obvious not to address.

There is no question that the more time students spend in the classroom, the better chance they have of finishing school and succeeding thereafter. That is why school-based arrests for non-violent, non-destructive behaviors are so insidious – they unnecessarily deprive students of valuable instructional time, they take parents away from their employment, and they disproportionately criminalize black and Hispanic students, as well as students with disabilities. Because of this disproportionality, they create a perception – and to be honest – a reality of unfair treatment, with no known positive effect on school safety or school climate. As the experiences of Manchester, Hartford, Bridgeport, and other cities show, S.B. 54 would reduce the numbers of unnecessary arrests by helping, indeed, requiring schools and law enforcement to work together to develop and implement clear guidelines for a graduated response to discipline problems. That would be a great outcome for everyone.

Thank you.

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