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**In Support of SB 54 An Act Concerning Collaboration between Boards of Education and
Law Enforcement Personnel**

Dr. Nancy A. Humphreys
Founding Director

Judiciary Committee, February 24th 2014

I am submitting this testimony urging the committee to **pass SB 54 An Act Concerning Collaboration between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel** as a beginning step to protecting the youth of Connecticut from increasing rates of arrest and criminalization. While I support the passing of this bill my testimony will focus on the issue of zero-tolerance and how it is a precursor to school-based arrests, and other forms of exclusionary discipline, in the hope that the committee will amend the current bill or introduce follow-up legislation to address this problem at its source.

Zero-tolerance policies, which limit the disciplinary discretion of school administrators, involve law enforcement personnel, and frequently result in exclusionary discipline actions (i.e. suspension, expulsion, and arrests)¹, were originally designed to apply to the possession of lethal weapons, illegal substances, and extreme violent behavior in a post-columbine society. Under the best of intentions, the federal government began providing funding to schools that implemented zero-tolerance policies to be used for such safety related improvements as metal detectors, reinforced windows, and school police officers which, in turn increased the number of schools that instituted zero policies to 79% of schools nationwide. An unintended consequence of this funding was that zero-tolerance policies began to expand beyond the safety issues they were originally designed to address and be applied to lesser behavioral infractions such as smoking or school yard fights, and typical boundary pushing behaviors of children and adolescents.¹

This trend continued and in the years that followed the introduction of zero-tolerance policies both incidences of exclusionary discipline increased even as occurrences of violent crimes committed by youth decreased. There has been a significant amount of data collected that demonstrates positive correlation between students experiencing school-based arrest and other forms of exclusionary discipline, and their later involvement in the adult corrections system. Our schools should be a safe, accepting, warm environment that encourages children to play, learn, and seek help when they struggle with their emotions and the trials of normal childhood growth. Instead we have an educational system that increasingly resembles the justice system and like the justice system students of color are disproportionately represented in school-based arrests. In a 2008 study of Connecticut's school discipline practices it was found that students of color were three times more likely to experience exclusionary

¹ A Generation Later: What We've Learned about Zero Tolerance in Schools, Jacob Kang-Brown, Jennifer Trone, Jennifer Fratello, Tarika Daftary-Kapur

discipline than students who are white. An additional study focused specifically on school-based arrests in Connecticut showed that not only did minority students represent a disproportionate percentage of arrests, they were more likely to be arrested than white students who committed the same infraction.² Furthermore, students who have special educational needs experience exclusionary discipline three times more often than mainstream students³.

Recent recommendations from President Obama encourage moving away from zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline, instead refocusing on an instructional approach to discipline that is clear and consistent, with removal from the learning environment being used only as a last resort. In the report that outlines the federal administration's recommendations on the reduction of arrests and suspensions it is noted that over reliance on exclusionary discipline in an effort to maintain safety and order actually does not provide increased safety, undermines the school's ability to modify student behavior and has serious ramifications for both the school's and the individual's academic outcomes⁴. Therefore, despite the controversial nature of zero-tolerance policies in a society shaken by school shootings, attempts to regulate or reduce school-based arrests and establish the most productive relationships between school personnel, law enforcement personnel, and our school children, will not be effective unless the problem of zero-tolerance policies, that have expanded beyond the level at which they are beneficial, is addressed.

Again, **I support the passage of SB 54** as a beginning step and urge the committee to produce an amendment or follow-up legislation to address zero tolerance policies. Thank you.

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² Invisible Student, A Better Way Foundation and Connecticut Pushout Research and Organization Project (2011)

³ Losen and Martinez (2003)

⁴ Administration Urges Restraints in Using Arrests or Expulsion to Discipline Students, Motoko Rich

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