Testimony of

Efrain Torres, Organizer

AFT Connecticut, AFL-CIO

Labor & Public Employees Committee

February 18, 2014

HB 5066 AN ACT CONCERNING CERTAIN WORKERS' RIGHTS TO COLLECTIVELY BARGAIN

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Tercyak and members of the Labor & Public Employees Committee. My name is Efrain Torres and I am an organizer at AFT Connecticut, a diverse state federation of unions representing nearly 29,000 public and private sector employees including state employees, nurses, healthcare workers, teachers and other school personnel. I am here today to testify in favor of HB 5066 An Act Concerning Certain Workers' Rights to Collectively Bargain.

The decision for workers to form a union is one which is usually prompted by a system which is perceived to be in need of repair. The most common issue raised at the beginning of an organizing campaign is the matter of those workers feeling as though they do not have a respected voice. A voice is critical in teachers' ability to provide input into changes which need to be made in the interest of providing the best educational experience possible for all parties concerned: students, teachers, parents, administrators, and communities as a whole.

If issues exist, within a non-unionized facility, it is often a result of a lack of communication, mostly between the teachers and their administrators. Teachers are trained to be skilled communicators. If their issues are not being heard and addressed it is seldom due to a lack of them expressing themselves. The purpose of forming a union is to compel all parties to establish effective lines of communication in order reach mutually agreeable solutions. However, until the rights and protections of collective bargaining are won, the balance of power between at-will teachers and their administrators can be very one-sided. Speaking out can be met by deaf ears and undesirable attitudes and repercussions.

The decision to form a union is one which pushes teachers beyond the comfort level of most. Concerns over how the effort will be perceived by superiors are intimidating to say the least. It is because of this that most demonstrations of an interest to form a union, outside of the charter school setting, begin with a confidential expression of that intention to a neutral party; one which acts impartially. Currently a request for a union authorization election is required to be

presented to the jurisdictional local board of education or the pertaining charter school governance council.

The formation of a union is perceived as a restructuring of the power dynamic within an organization. There is no question in the minds of employees that their employers will disapprove of the formation of a union. This view exists because teachers know as well as anyone that no amount of power changes hands easily. To most, it seems like something which management will take as confrontational.

While being confrontational is not the teachers' intent, it is that perception which inhibits teachers from proceeding in exercising their right to unionize. The idea of having to make their identities known to the very people with whom they have not had good communication, and who have almost absolute power over their positions in the workplace, is a blatant obstacle which needs to be removed.

HB 5066 proposes a solution for this problem that did not exist when the Teachers' Negotiation Act enacted. Rather than have the identities of the people interested in forming a union being presented to their direct lines of supervision, in the form of the local board of education or the pertaining charter school governance council, the bill proposes that the request for recognition be presented to and verified by a neutral party, the State Board of Education. By doing so, employees can begin the process of exercising their right to form a union in an atmosphere which is free of intimidation, intentional or unintentional.