

Testimony Supporting

S.B. 203: An Act Concerning a State-Wide Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness Program¹

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Committee on Children

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Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, and distinguished members of the committee:

We are testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices supports the creation of a sexual abuse and assault awareness program, which will help schools to support children academically and emotionally as they deal with the trauma of sexual violence.

Sexual abuse and assault can cause severe childhood trauma.² Victims of such sexual abuse and assault also are more likely to experience other adverse childhood experiences detrimental to future health.³ Childhood trauma negatively impacts brain development, increasing biological risk factors that cause children to become distracted and defensive, and to engage in risky behavior.⁴ As a result, children who are exposed to trauma are more likely to experience academic failure, more likely to be chronically absent from school, and more likely to have behavior problems in schools.⁵

It is also important to note that many children who have been exposed to serious trauma adapt negatively to their traumatic environment by acting out or engaging in distracting or disruptive behavior.⁶ Unfortunately, Connecticut's schools often respond to these behaviors with exclusionary discipline, even when these are behaviors that could be managed by the school while keeping children in the classroom.⁷ These disciplinary tactics not only cost students valuable time in class; they may also often force trauma victims to stay at home in the traumatic environment that is causing the disruptive behavior in schools.

Trauma victims in Connecticut appear to be behind in school.

¹ Testimony adapted from the report by Kenneth Feder and Tamara Kramer, "Raise the Grade: Improving Educational Opportunities for Youth in State Care," *Connecticut Voices for Children*. January 2014. Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/raise-grade-improving-educational-opportunities-children-state-care>.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

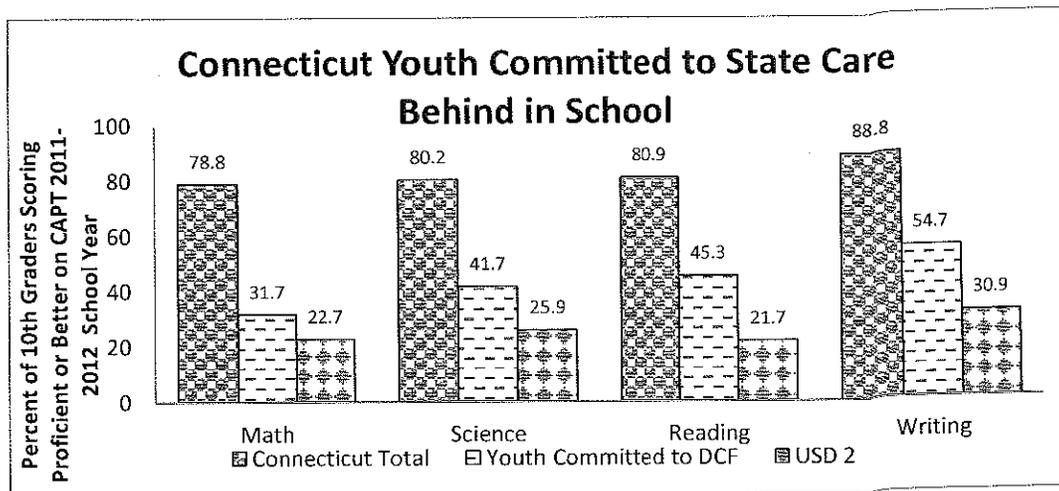
⁴ See, Vincent Felitti et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. May, 1998. Available at <http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797%2898%2900017-8/fulltext#section19>.

⁵ See, Christopher Blodget, "Adopting ACEs Screening and Assessment in Child Serving Systems," *Washington State University*. July, 2012. Available at <http://extension.wsu.edu/ahec/trauma/Documents/ACE%20Screening%20and%20Assessment%20in%20Child%20Serving%20Systems%207-12%20final.pdf>.

⁶ See, Kari Jacobsen, "Educators' Experience with Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom," *St. Catherine University*. May, 2013. Available at http://sophia.stkate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1201&context=msw_papers.

⁷ See, Jeana Bracey et al. "Improving Outcomes for Children in Schools: Expanded School Mental Health. August 2013. Available at <http://www.chdi.org/admin/uploads/682667905526837dc13ac9.pdf>.

The detrimental impact of trauma on education is particularly apparent in the academic performance of children in the care of Connecticut's Department of Children and Families' (DCF) foster care and juvenile justice systems.⁸ It is likely that most of these Connecticut children have been victims of some form of childhood trauma.⁹ As shown below, these children in state care are less likely than their peers to score proficient or better on state standardized tests, a common measure of academic performance.¹⁰



Childhood trauma, such as sexual abuse and assault, can deprive children of academic opportunity.

Voices is encouraged that, in addition to important prevention measures, the proposed bill requires training for teachers on the prevention, identification, and response to sexual assault, and encourages a uniform sexual assault policy which guides victims to assistance, provides them with counseling, and provides them with academic supports. All of these measures will help to alleviate the detrimental impact of trauma on learning, and may deter inappropriate exclusionary discipline.

We encourage the committee to support S.B. 203, and to ensure that any sexual abuse and assault program supports the provision of trauma-informed treatment and academic assistance that can keep children learning and in the classroom in spite of their experience.

⁸ See, Kenneth Feder and Tamara Kramer, "Raise the Grade: Improving Educational Opportunities for Youth in State Care," *Connecticut Voices for Children*. January 2014. Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/raise-grade-improving-educational-opportunities-children-state-care>.

⁹ See, Portland Research Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health, "Traumatic Stress/ Child Welfare," *Focal Point: Research, Policy, and Practice in Children's Mental Health*. Winter, 2007, Volume 21, No. 1. Available at <http://www rtc.pdx.edu/PDF/fpW07.pdf>, or through Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/trauma.cfm>. See also, Robert Franks, "Building a Trauma Informed System of Care for Children in Connecticut," *Connecticut Health and Development Institute*. Available at http://www.governor.ct.gov/malloy/lib/malloy/SHAC_Doc_2013.04.26_Franks_presentation.pdf

¹⁰ Figure adapted from Kenneth Feder and Tamara Kramer, "Raise the Grade: Improving Educational Opportunities for Youth in State Care," *Connecticut Voices for Children*. January 2014. Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/raise-grade-improving-educational-opportunities-children-state-care>.
Connecticut Voices for Children