

Testimony of John Tarka  
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Raised Bill 7018: An Act Concerning Alternative Education

It is an honor to be before you, talking about something that I am so passionate about. In my 13 years as an educator, I've taught in alternative schools the entire time. In many ways, I have learned more from the students have learned from me. They have taught me about resilience in reaching and realizing ones potential, a compassion for those who are overlooked, and a desire to learn that proves itself every morning. When people tell me how lucky the students are for having me as their teacher, I quickly correct them, telling them that I am the lucky one, for being able to teach such exceptional human beings.

In speaking before you today, I don't just want to praise the students who thrive in the alternative school setting, but also shed light on the wonderful teachers, educators and facilitators who make the magic happen in the classroom, halls and offices of schools like New Horizons. Much like the students, some teachers find their way to alternative schools through forced circumstances, a displacement, or being transferred as a matter of staff seniority. Their mettle is tested early and often, and it doesn't take long to see if that teacher is made to teach at an alternative school. Despite the teacher's best effort and intention, they struggle sometimes in a challenging setting that is in an alternative school.

However, teachers who thrive in the alternative schools are the ones who lead the classrooms, find creative ways to reach the students, make learning engaging, facilitate activities, and use every interaction with a student as a teachable moment, every day. Sometimes these challenges and approaches can be extremely daunting. These fine men and women are the secret ingredient to making the success stories that are these students. A true alternative educator is one works closely and ensures that through positive and productive relationships these young people will succeed in class, and more importantly, in life.

The finest teachers are not the ones who lead classrooms of self-motivated young people who enjoy their hard earned academic success, but the ones who inspire, motivate and mold the reluctant or challenged learner. Yet, too often alternative schools face such strict budgetary restrictions that the most dynamic teacher never reaches the neediest audiences. The student's opportunities are limited at these schools, and what's sacrificed is a diverse, progressive and varied educational experience. I am certain that every alternative school has great people, and I am also certain that every alternative school doesn't have *enough* great people. Alternative schools don't need good people who are moved to teach, alternative schools need great people who are born to educate others.

Furthermore, the lens with which teachers in alternative schools are viewed needs to change. No longer should the alternative school teacher be viewed in the same way as one in a traditional regular education setting. In some cases, teachers in alternative schools feel that they are working with the same deficits that their students are struggling in-a lack of professional support and a feeling of neglect and dismissiveness. There is a fine line between support and scrutiny, and at times an alternative school teacher feels that some standards and measures of evaluation do not accurately reflect the growth that they are cultivating in their students. In order for our students to succeed, the right teachers, the best teachers need to be in alternative schools.

I often think about what makes a great teacher in an alternative school. The familiar buzz words arise, such as determination, tenacity, confidence, kindness, enthusiasm, engaging and forward thinking. On a daily basis, these qualities are apparent at New Horizons, and alternative schools everywhere. There is no substitute for a great teacher, the one who leads from the front, spending years on the front lines of education. In keeping with the analogy, if teachers are the soldiers fighting for the future of America's youth, then teachers in alternative schools are the Special Forces, doing the unseen, unheard and unheralded work in neglected buildings. Yet, reinforcements are needed in these settings. And these reinforcements must have a hearts of gold and a spine of steel. I urge you to pass this bill 7018 in the hopes of expanding and solidifying support for alternative schools in Connecticut.

Respectfully Submitted,

John Tarka