



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Commission on Children



**Testimony before the Education Committee on Raised S.B. 1058, H.B. 6974, S.B. 1054;
and S.B. 1053
Submitted by Steven Hernández, Director of Public Policy and Research
Connecticut Commission on Children
March 11, 2015**

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and Members of the Education Committee:

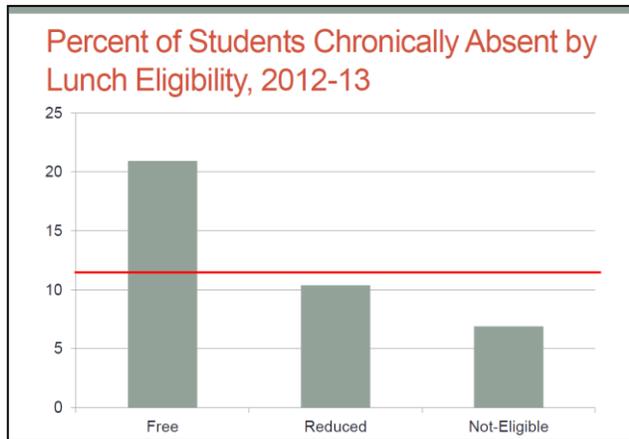
My name is Steven Hernández. I am the Director of Public Policy and Research of the CT Commission on Children and I am here today to speak in favor of:

- S.B. No. 1058 (Raised) An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism;
- H.B. No. 6974 (Raised) An Act Implementing The Recommendations Of The Achievement Gap Task Force Concerning The Creation Of A Director Of Reading Initiatives At The Department Of Education;
- S.B. No. 1054 (Raised) An Act Concerning Students With Dyslexia;
- S.B. No. 1053 (Raised) An Act Prohibiting Out-Of-School Suspensions And Expulsions For Students In Preschool And Grades Kindergarten To Two.

S.B. No. 1058 (Raised) An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism

Good attendance is essential to student achievement and graduation. But too often, students, parents and schools do not realize how quickly absences – excused or unexcused – can leave children and youth falling behind. Chronic absence – missing ten percent of the school year, or just 2-3 days each month – predicts lower third-grade reading proficiency, course failure and eventual dropout.

The impact hits children of color and low-income students particularly hard, especially if they don't have the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom. These children are more likely to face systemic barriers to getting to school – such as unreliable



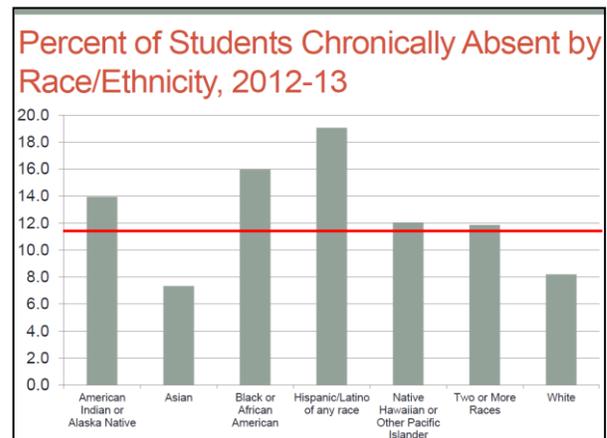
transportation or conflicting parent work schedules. Other factors that contribute to chronic absence may be situated in the family, school, and the community and include high family mobility, low maternal education, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, ineffective parent engagement, and high levels of neighborhood violence.

Although attendance policy is typically developed by local education agencies,

SDE can play a key role in promoting best practices and marshalling resources to ensure that schools track the most reliable attendance data and intervene in meaningful ways.

Essential to this is looking beyond the traditional measures of attendance: the number

of students who show up every day (average daily attendance) and the number of students skipping school (truancy). Schools and districts must look at how many students are missing ten percent the school year in unexcused and excused absences, including disciplinary absences. Research shows that ten percent is the threshold where absenteeism correlates to poor academic outcomes.¹



H.B. No. 6974 (Raised) An Act Implementing The Recommendations Of The Achievement Gap Task Force Concerning The Creation Of A Director Of Reading Initiatives At The Department Of Education

In our work with Districts and schools around the state in promoting and implementing strategies to close the achievement gap in reading, we learned that what was missing from the State Department of Education was guidance and leadership in coordinating

¹ Data for both charts provided by Connecticut State Department of Education

the resources, both financial and intellectual, that teachers and school leaders need to teach reading successfully.

Leadership is critical at all levels, but where it is needed most is at the highest levels of the Education Department. The qualifications of a reading director that you see in this bill were developed in line with what Florida and Colorado did to close the achievement gap in their own states. At a public forum organized by the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, representatives from both states testified that having an expert in the science of teaching coordinating the department's response to District needs made a real difference for schools that were struggling with high numbers of children needing intensive reading interventions, professional development, reading assessment development, parent engagement, and an organized ELL strategy.

S.B. No. 1054 (Raised) An Act Concerning Students With Dyslexia

While language is hardwired into the human brain, reading is not. Reading is a skill that some children have more difficulty developing than others. According to KidsHealth, "about 15% to 20% of the U.S. population has the specific reading disability called dyslexia, which is the major cause of reading failure in school. Dealing with this learning challenge can lead to frustration and self-doubt, especially when it goes undiagnosed for a long time. The good news is that dyslexia can be identified early and kids who have it can be taught to become successful readers."

Our teachers need help in diagnosing dyslexia early. As others have testified today, teachers are not adequately prepared to diagnostically assess and prescriptively teach children fundamental reading skills. Dyslexia's core deficit is in the area of phonological processing. In layperson's language, these individuals have difficulty processing (i.e., hearing and understanding) the sounds that make up words. According to Dr. Margie Gillis of Literacy How, "Although most K-3 educators know the term phonemic awareness and some can even define it, they don't understand it well enough to teach it explicitly, effectively, and to mastery."

This bill is a critical first step to their success.

**S.B. No. 1053 (Raised) An Act Prohibiting Out-Of-School Suspensions And Expulsions
For Students In Preschool And Grades Kindergarten To Two**

This bill is critical to ensuring that developmentally appropriate measures are taken to help, not punish, those who are young and in need of support. Prohibiting the expulsion or OSS for those in Kindergarten through to 2nd grade would encourage schools and districts to follow best practices regarding ascertaining root causes of behavioral and emotional dysregulation in the school, and linking children and families with appropriate support and services in order to address these difficulties.

We know that SDE is taking the following actions to reduce suspensions for our youngest children:

- Increasing family engagement
- Engaging partners and identifying best practices in mental health referrals, de-escalating confrontation, and restorative justice
- Aligning efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism with addressing S/E
- Workshops on positive school climate

We would also recommend adding to this list: screening for ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and working through a two-generational lens when creating a plan that best addresses root causes or problematic behaviors and providing support and services that engage not only the child but the family unit as a whole in order to address chronic stressors. We believe these alternatives are more age-appropriate, likely to address the root causes of these behavior problems in the school, and encourage earlier interventions that may yield long-term impact on school behavior and addressing the achievement gap issues along gender, racial and poverty line

Thank you for your time.

