

Testimony of Leon Smith, Esq. on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Support of Raised Bill 7018: An Act Concerning Alternative Education

Education Committee

To the chairpersons and members of the Education Committee, I submit this testimony on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit organization affiliated with the University of Connecticut School Of Law in support of Raised Bill 7018. The Center provides legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. I am an attorney and the Director of the Center's Alternative Schools Project, where our aim is to promote positive reform to the alternative education system, ensuring that all students receive appropriate educational services, increasing the percentage of youth who graduate from high school and improving overall educational achievement and outcomes.

To that end, I have spent the last several years working as an educational attorney and advocate on behalf of students in alternative education across the state, as well as speaking with parents, administrators, faculty, staff and community providers about their experiences in alternative education. Based upon these experiences, I strongly feel that alternative education in Connecticut is in need of increased oversight and substantive reform. To that end, I support Raised Bill 7018 for the following reasons:

1. Raised Bill 7018 defines alternative education, providing guidance and direction for local and regional boards of education.

Alternative education is not defined by statute, providing no guiding principles for boards of education in creating these schools and programs or establishing the standards that should be met in order to properly serve this group of high need students.

Section 1 of this Bill addresses the lack of definition for alternative education and the lack of guidance to boards of education by:

- Defining alternative education as an educational option maintained and operated by local or regional boards of education that are offered to students in a nontraditional setting.
- Ensuring that alternative education is geared to meet the social, emotional and behavioral needs of its students.
- Establishing clarity by specifying that alternative education may function within a space in an existing school or be established as a separate school.

2. Raised Bill 7018 requires data and information on alternative education to be made public, providing oversight on the performance of these schools and needed information to parents and students across the state.

Alternative education, and the students in its schools and programs, has long been "invisible" in Connecticut. While traditional public schools are required to provide the State Department of Education (SDE) with data and information that is made publicly available, such as test scores, attendance, instructional hours and course offerings, alternative education is not subject to these requirements. This has created a significant data gap which leaves alternative education without appropriate oversight and parents and students without readily available information about their quality.

- The SDE report showed that 84% of alternative education schools and programs do not have "organization codes" which are used in state reporting systems. This means that information

about these schools and programs, and their students, are not known to the State Department of Education.¹

- This data gap is exacerbated by the inconsistency in reporting on student enrollment, as some districts report alternative school program students as still enrolled at their home public school while others report the student as enrolled at the alternative program.
- The SDE report shows the need for ongoing reporting in order to ensure transparency. Without it, there will once again be a lack of comprehensive data regarding students in alternative education and the quality of their learning experience.

Sections 2(b) and 4(c) of this Bill ensures better oversight of alternative education by **mandating**:

- All alternative education schools and programs provided by a local or regional board of education be assigned an identification code and organization code for purposes of collecting, tracking and monitoring such alternative education in the public school information system
- Alternative education is included in each local or regional board of education's strategic school profile report.

3. Raised Bill 7018 will help ensure that alternative education provides a quality educational experience that is comparable to traditional public schools

There are schools and programs in alternative education that do not offer the same number of class hours as traditional public schools, resulting in students receiving less than their contemporaries once they transfer to an alternative program. This creates the potential for these settings to become “dumping grounds” for vulnerable students and the first stop on the road to school drop-out.

- According to the SDE report, at least 10% of students in alternative and dropout diversion programs don't receive the statutory minimum 900 hours of instruction.²
- In several Alliance Districts, students in alternative and dropout prevention programs are receiving up significantly fewer hours of instruction than their public school counterparts.³
- There are alternative education settings in the state that have few resources and are physically set in subpar, dilapidated settings without adequate materials, staffing and resources to meet the needs students who are often the most vulnerable in their respective school districts.

Sections 1(b) and 3(a) of this Bill addresses the unequal educational experience in alternative education by **requiring**:

- That students who move from their public school into alternative education continue to receive the same minimum number of school sessions and hours of school work as in their traditional public schools pursuant to §10-15 and 10-16 of the general statutes and subject to all federal and state laws governing public schools.
- The amendment of 10-220(a) of the general statutes to ensure that alternative education is included in the statutory mandate for local or regional boards of education to ensure that all children are provided with “as nearly equal advantages as may be practicable” and are provided with “an appropriate learning environment”.

¹ Connecticut State Department of Education, Report on the Study of Alternative School Programs, 2-3-14, p. 5

² Connecticut State Department of Education, Report on the Study of Alternative School Programs, 2-3-24, p. 8

³ Center for Children's Advocacy, Alternative Schools and Programs: Views from the Inside, The Need for Systemic Review and Reform in Connecticut, p. 6 (www.kidscounsel.org)

4. Raised Bill 7018 will ensure that alternative education has defined entrance and exit requirements for student entry and return to public schools, which will safeguard against students being “pushed out” into these programs with no way out.

There is not a defined process for how students enter into and exit out of alternative education. This has created wide variance in how students end up in alternative education and resulted in some students feeling “pushed” into programs that are not a good fit for their academic and social needs, without a clear pathway to leave and return to their traditional public school.

- Students have a legal right to remain in public high school until the age of 21, but many as young as 16 with histories of truancy, academic and discipline problems are told by school personnel that their public high school “isn’t working” and that they must attend an alternative school program;

Section 2(a) of this Bill helps ensure that placements into alternative programs are voluntary and appropriate by **requiring**:

- That all students transferred into alternative education, and those leaving to return to their public schools, be placed subject to regulations and parameters developed by the State Department of Education.

Thank you very much for your time and attention to these very important issues impacting the quality of education for our youth.

Respectfully submitted by:

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