

Testimony of Maureen L. Bransfield
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Raised Bill 7018: An Act Concerning Alternative Education

I thank you all for coming to the table in an effort to reform and invigorate alternative education in the state of Connecticut. I am proud of the students that represent not only New Horizons high school today but all the alternative high schools that are not present. In addition this is a wonderful opportunity to enhance and enlighten equity in the area of alternative education.

It is with great passion and pride that I put together some of my thoughts. What you will read below is rhetoric for many of you but for some it may be informative.

For decades we have taken our disengaged, truant, and behavioral challenged students (that disrupt the typical educational environment) and “moved” them out to an “alternative setting”. Those cynical about the system these kids have abandoned have called them the “throw away” kids. At the very least, these are the “go away” kids. These kids we speak of can be looked at as the “dis” kids: disengaged, discredited, disenfranchised, disinterested, disconnected, disaffiliated, disappointed, disassociated, disconcerting, disenchanting...they, themselves, speak of being “dissed” when they feel they are being disrespected.

The unspoken truth is that the alternate environments that students were and are moved to were never given an opportunity to create themselves; rather they were created as the need arose as a “holding” place of sorts. The elephant in the room is the perception that these students “don’t want to learn,” “they are too troubled to learn,” and “they don’t deserve to learn”. This is why these schools have remained under funded, under staffed, and un-reformed. The real truth however, is that all human beings have an innate curiosity and desire to learn. This desire can be stifled but is never extinguished. For our “dis” kids, we must address the reasons that have stifled their desire and resulted in them not being “READY TO LEARN”. It is essential that these “barriers to learning” be identified and remedied. **Then, and only then**, can the desire to learn be reignited.

In seeking the reform of our Alternative Learning Environments, it is imperative to concentrate on identifying and giving resources to address student’s barriers to learning. We are now called by State and Federal mandates, as well as our own conscious, to develop comprehensive and systematic approaches for addressing barriers to learning and re-engaging our disconnected students. One approach needs to address “Learning supports”: Learning supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that provide the physical, social, emotional and intellectual supports that directly address barriers to learning and teaching that ultimately re-engage disconnected students, and the other approach needs to support meaningful engagement (trades/diversified academic instruction). Why trades? Well, for the most part most alternative students do not go on to college right after graduation. What do they do then? Good question. We graduate them out into the community untrained and ill prepared. These are the very students that are most likely to stay in their community and look to gain employment. It is critical to create opportunities for students to gain certificates and training in careers that will give them the much needed motivation to engage at high levels. Our students want to pursue trades in order to be prepared to enter the work force immediately following graduation.

Strategic staffing: metaphor = It is essential to have “Varsity” level teachers who are able to hear the music of our students and create dances around their needs, interests and ability levels while leading them towards fulfilling their potential socially, emotionally and academically. Currently, there is no

special consideration for the need of a uniquely qualified educator. These Educators must possess the ability to not only reach this unique set of students, but to then have the excitement, enthusiasm, and motivational skills critical in helping students conquer their barriers to learning.

It is clear to see that my passion lies around addressing the barriers to learning that our students come to school with. Math, science, English and history are all very important but when students are in trauma, depressed, and otherwise socially or emotionally maladjusted, it is impossible for them to learn.

One of my concerns in this bill is that alternative schools will now be responsible to show growth in areas that are not supported. We should show growth. And we should show growth that's realistic based on the students that sit before us. If we are to show social and emotional growth it is essential for programs to be supported with specialists that are trained to address these barriers. We cannot continue to rely on our academic teachers to fill this role as they are not qualified. In addition if we are to show growth academically, it needs to be proportionate to where the student is when they arrive. For instance most students are way below grade level by 3-4 years. For them to be measured with their peer cohort after one year is not realistic.

I have been in education for 23 1/2 years, and this is how alternative educational environments typically have run: underfunded, under resourced, and overpopulated. Working in alternative education has been like running an emergency room that is not equipped with enough bandages, bacitracin, beds, specialists, or effective doctors. Yet we are dealing with the most injured and traumatized patients. If I were to go to the hospital with a severe injury I would expect and demand the best care from the best professionals utilizing the best equipment and having access to the most specialized resources.

We in alternative education have been dealing with students who are severely academically, socially, and emotionally injured. They need the best care and most up-to-date services we can offer. We all should expect and demand that they get treated with the same level of importance and respect as students in AP classes. It has always amaze me in education that we take the brightest most engaged kids and give them the best of everything – the irony is that they are hungry for learning despite all the resources –yet our struggling learners who need the bells and whistles often get none.

In closing I would like to say how wonderful it is that there's any type of bill going forward around alternative education. It does not need to be perfect: by just being it is creating awareness.

I urge policymakers to visit alternative programs and get first-hand information. Each program is very unique and needs the latitude and resources that are necessary for that specific environment. Accountability is essential but we simultaneously need also make sure there is equity of resources that support the accountability.

I thank you very much for your dedication to bring equity and support to our alternative education environments.

Mindfully submitted,

Maureen L Bransfield

