



Testimony of

Tom Marak

Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

**SB 378 AAC THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL
GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS TASK FORCE**

March 7, 2016

Members of the State of Connecticut General Assembly Committee on Education,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank members of the committee for their consideration of SB378 and the recommendations of the High School Graduation Requirements Task Force that it contains. I apologize for not being able to give my testimony in person, but felt my students needed me to be present in class at the time that the hearing is taking place.

As the teacher representing the CEA on the task force, I would like to voice my support for the changes that are encompassed in Section 1 of this bill. Our recommendations and the bill strive to provide more flexibility to students and school systems as a bridge to the development of a new set of requirements as outlined in Section 2 of the bill. While there may be some concern for eliminating the specific credited courses listed in the past, the task force felt that with the stability of college admissions requirements, any changes will be gradual. Also, it was envisioned that important subjects like civics and other humanities currently listed in the statute would be specifically included in the guidance that is required to be provided by State Department of Education as indicated in Sec. 1. (d).

With regards to Section 2, I have some concerns about the membership of the council. I believe the PTA should be included under subsection "(2)" (lines 186-192) and that subsection "(3)" (lines 192-197) should be simplified to include "additional persons selected by the Commissioner of Education as deemed appropriate," as the current wording seems redundant. As it is currently worded, it basically says the commissioner will select a number of people representing various ill-defined groups and ends by adding anyone else deemed appropriate. I believe the commissioner is well equipped to select the additional people needed.

Also, since there are many possible interpretations of personalized learning (see Sec. 2 (b) (3); lines 204-206), it is important to note that the key understanding must be that personalized learning is based on the need of the student to maximize and individualize their learning, which must consider how that can be best accomplished for a student. For some, personalized learning means increasing the time students spend accessing online or app-based instruction. It is critical that this committee avoids defining personalized learning in a way that enables such interpretations. Humans, especially teachers, must remain central to the learning process. In other words, a personalized plan developed by the student and parents, in consultation with and overseen by education professionals, can provide enriching individualization. Personalized learning that focuses on virtual learning cannot – and would provide virtually no real learning.

Two final points that I would like to make fall into the area of what is needed to make this all work. First, it is imperative that if we are to move to a model that increases students' learning options, teachers must be given the training and tools to provide the continual advice students will need to be able to make good choices. While school counselors are a vital part of the process, in the model envisioned, the on-going advice of teachers will also be necessary in providing proper support. Second, providing such opportunities and flexibility must be done in an equitable manner across all districts. We can not simply allow only those districts with more resources to be able to provide individualized options for students when less resourced districts can only provide cheaper standardized or even mechanized curricula, fewer options, and the bare basics of support. The learning gaps that exist in Connecticut have many causes, but we all know that one of the causes, if not the major cause, is the socio-economic disparity that exists in our state. I would urge the committee to further explore how this issue can and should be addressed for I fear that unless that is done, we will only be improving opportunities for students in districts that are already able to provide some of the best academic and learning environments now. As a result, the gap could expand.

Once again, thank you to the committee for this opportunity to voice my position, support for the flexibilities outlined in the bill, and some of the concerns that I have. I would also like to commend my fellow task force members for providing great comments and discussion regarding our charge. Their concern for students and the future of education in Connecticut are admirable and I appreciate having had the opportunity to work with them.

Sincerely,

Thomas P. Marak
Teacher North Haven High School
(Civics, AP US Government, Gifted and Talented Facilitator, Future Problem Solving Coach)
CEA Representative to the High School Graduation Requirements Task Force
36 Augur Road, Northford, CT 06472