



Testimony Supporting **Senate Bill 381: An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study School Climate**

Jennifer Fredricks, Ph.D.

Educational Committee

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

My name is Jennifer Fredricks and I am a professor of Human Development at Connecticut College where I have done extensive research on how to create more engaging and supportive school environments. I am here testifying on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, where I am currently serving as a William T. Grant Distinguished Fellow. Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the wellbeing of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children supports Senate Bill 381: An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study School Climate. We appreciate the Education Committee's acknowledgement of the importance of school climate reforms, and the role that these policies can play in creating safe, supportive, and engaging schools.

We offer the following three suggested changes to strengthen the proposed legislation:

- 1. Expand the scope of the topics addressed in the task force to include policies related to exclusionary disciplinary practices.**
- 2. Appoint a more diverse group of stakeholders to this task force.**
- 3. Use data to promote effective school climate reform.**

School climate is one of the most heavily researched concepts in education. The work on school climate also overlaps with an extensive scholarship on school engagement, school connectedness, positive youth development, and socio-emotional learning.¹ This research has considered both the conditions that promote positive school climate and the impact of school climate on academic adjustment, psychological well-being, social competence, and risk behavior. We strongly encourage the educational committee and appointed task force to ground their work in this rich and extensive body of literature. I included a list of some of these resources in my written testimony.

A recent review of over 200 studies of school climate, identified five key dimensions of school climate: including: 1) safety (e.g., physical and emotional), 2) relationships (e.g., peer-to-peer and adult-student), 3) teaching and learning (e.g., academic, civic, and social), 4) the institutional environment (e.g., connections/engagement, resources, and physical layout), and 5) school improvement (e.g., leadership and professional development).² **A positive school climate is good for all students, but is particularly beneficial to our most vulnerable youth.** Students have higher achievement, are more motivated to learn, and are less likely to drop out in schools with a

positive school climate. Improving the school climate can also improve students' mental health and reduce incidences of risky behavior. A positive school climate is related to higher self-esteem, lower substance use, fewer psychiatric incidents, and fewer behavioral problems.³

Although Connecticut Voices for Children supports the main tenets of Senate Bill 381, we respectfully recommend three changes to strengthen the bill:

1. **Expand the scope of the topics addressed in the task force to include policies related to exclusionary disciplinary practices.** School arrests, expulsions, and suspensions influence the quality of students' relationships with adults, a key dimension of school climate. Research conducted by Connecticut Voices for Children shows that the overuse and misuse of exclusionary disciplinary practices contributes to a poorer school climate for all students. Connecticut public schools continue to suspend, expel, and arrest minority students, special education students, and students from poorer districts at rates disproportionate to their representation in the student population.⁴
2. **Appoint a more diverse group of stakeholders to this task force.** Specifically, we recommend the appointment of a juvenile justice advocate who can provide insight into the relation between school climate and the school-to-prison pipeline. In addition, we believe the task force would benefit from the appointment of additional elementary and secondary teachers who represent a range of communities across the state. Teachers can provide invaluable insight into how different policies influence the norms and values of the school, the teaching and learning context, and whether and how students feel supported socially and emotionally.
3. **Use data to promote effective school climate reform.** The Connecticut Department of Education administers voluntary school climate surveys, but participation rates for these surveys and how this data is being used to inform policies and practice at the district and state level is unclear. We encourage the task force to make use of the data that is currently being collected by the Department of Education, as well as looking into requiring all schools to collect data using nationally validated surveys of school climate, such as the TELLS: Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning Survey or the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (National School Climate Center).⁵

Thank you very much for this opportunity to testify in support of S.B. 381. Please do not hesitate to reach out to either myself or another staff member at Connecticut Voices for Children with any further questions or resources that can be helpful to your work on this task force.

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¹Amrit Thapa, Johanthan Cohen, Shawn Guffey and Ann Higgins-D'Allesandro, "A Review of School Climate Research." Review of Educational Research, 3, 387-385 (2013); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/connectedness.pdf>; Jennifer Fredricks, Phyllis Blumenfeld, and Alison Paris. "School engagement: potential of the construct and state of the evidence." Review of Educational Research, 7, 59-109, (2004); Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2013). CASEL guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs, preschool and elementary school edition. Retrieved from <http://casel.org/guide>; Mark Greenberg et al. "Enhancing School-Based Prevention and Youth Development through Coordinated Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning." American Psychologist, 58, 466-474, (2003).

²Amrit Thapa, Johanthan Cohen, Shawn Guffey and Ann Higgins-D'Allesandro, "A Review of School Climate Research." *Review of Educational Research*, 3, 387-385 (2013)

³Ibid; Center for Social and Emotional Education. "School climate research summary." Retrieved from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/sc-brief-v1.pdf>; Johnathan Cohen, Libby McCabe, Nicholas Michelli, and Terry Pickeral, "School Climate: Research, Policy, Teacher Education and Practice." *Teachers College Record*, 111, 180–213 (2009).

⁴Sarah Iverson, Edie Joseph, and Cyd Oppenheimer, "Keeping Kids in Class: School Discipline in Connecticut, 2008-2013. Retrieved at <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/jj15schoolarrestsreport.pdf>

⁵American Institute of Research, "Measuring School Climate for Gauging Principal Effectiveness: A Review of Validity and Reliability of Publically Accessible Measures. Retrieved at http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/school_climate2_0.pdf; Jerome Freiberg. "School Climate: Measuring, Improving, and Sustaining Health Learning", Philadelphia, Falmer Press (1999). National School Climate Center. "Measuring School Climate." retrieved at <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/practice.php>