

FAIRFIELD EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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**Testimony of Robert Smoler
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HB 7252

AN ACT ESTABLISHING AN ADJUDICATION PROCESS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AND THE RIGHT OF PARENTS TO OBSERVE THEIR CHILDREN AT SCHOOL

BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

MARCH 16, 2017

My name is Bob Smoler. I am a math teacher at Fairfield Warde H.S. in Fairfield, Connecticut as well as the President of the Fairfield Education Association, an association representing nearly 1,000 educators teaching and supporting students in the Fairfield public schools.

Before offering my concerns I want to emphasize how important parents are to the education process. Parents' active involvement in their child's schooling is often the difference in the extent of a child's progress. That being said, Section 2 of HB 7252 stands to materially impact the education environment of classrooms in Connecticut in a negative way.

A classroom is a safe community consisting of students and education professionals as its members. At the beginning of every year, the teacher establishes rules for the community that allow all students to focus and interact in a productive manner, thus allowing learning to take place. Establishing effective classroom routines is critical to learning. If a parent or parents were added to a classroom on a somewhat regular basis, the whole classroom dynamic would change.

- For many students, they would be looking back at their parent(s) for attention and approval. For others, who don't want their parents observing their interaction with their teacher and peers, their discomfort would affect their learning. In either case, the parent's presence would be a disruption of the classroom routines and would detract from the learning process.
- For teachers, parent observations have the potential to lead to parent critiques of a teacher's techniques. If a parent doesn't like something the teacher does, or the parent doesn't feel the teacher is providing enough

attention or support to his or her child, the parent and teacher could potentially end up in an adversarial relationship, which ultimately hurts the students. The fact is that in a classroom of 25-30 students, where teachers are differentiating instruction based on student needs, not all students are going to get the same type of attention. Teachers are trained professionals, and they need to be given the space to do their job in the best way they can, accountable to their administrators who are also trained professionals.

It's also not clear to me what problem HB 7252 is designed to solve. Parents already have the ability and right to meet with administrators and teachers concerning their children. Parents of children with special needs attend PPT and Team meetings where their child's progress and needed services are discussed. Schools send progress reports home on all students multiple times per year. Many districts have policies and procedures for parents to observe their children in school in a non-disruptive way. Most teacher evaluation plans have a component relating to parent communication. These methods of communication/involvement would seem to be more than adequate to keep a parent up to speed on what is going on with their child.

Logistically HB 7252 would present some real challenges for schools.

1. Administratively and from a safety standpoint, keeping track of which parents (representatives) are coming in and when, and getting them all background checked (this is district policy) and off to the right classroom would be a real challenge. As an example, Fairfield Warde has 1,500 students. If each of 2 parents came in to observe their child for 16 hours, that would be 48,000 hours of observations, which would mean that it's possible that 40+ parents could be observing students in the building at any given point in time. There is also the question of whether or not all parents observing their children would have to be fingerprinted or not. For example, The federal Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 (AWA) requires a person who only accompanies a chorus during a performance twice per year, who has no interaction with students and is only around students when a teacher is supervising the room must be fingerprinted at a cost of \$60.75 per person. Based on that, it is logical to expect that a parent who is in a school and around students for twice that length of time would have to be fingerprinted as well. If so, who pays the cost?
2. Even though the bill does have some privacy language in it, there is realistically no way to ensure the privacy of students being observed. Parents in classrooms would witness special education students receiving differentiated services and supports making it easy to determine which students have a disability. They would witness students having a hard day and at their most vulnerable. They would be witnessing behavior problems, etc. Teachers are trained on what to do in these situations. Who is to say how parents would react and what they would do with what they see.

Finally, we really don't have to wonder how things would work out. This situation plays out in our youth sports programs every day. For 25 years I ran the youth baseball programs in Westport, Connecticut and if I had a nickel for every parent-coach dispute I had to arbitrate over playing time, who plays what positions, who bats in what position in the batting order, and who is on what team I wouldn't have to work anymore. Is this really how we want our administrators to spend their time? Parents and teachers have an excellent relationship right now with both parties respectful of the role the other plays. Doesn't it make sense to keep it that way?

If the assembly feels this is an issue that needs to be addressed, the best course of action would be to require districts to develop policies as to when and under what circumstances parents, and their representatives, can observe their children in school. School boards know the dynamics in their community and are more than capable of coming up with the most sensible, least disruptive way of addressing parent concerns.

Thank you.