Honorable education committee chairpersons and members,

Asian Americans for Equal Rights (AAER) is a grassroots organization that dedicates itself to the protection of the safety, dignity, and humanity of Asian Americans and immigrants. As the chairperson of the AAER, I am writing to express our support for Senate Bill No. 359 “Prohibiting the Disaggregation of Student Data by Ethnic or Racial Subgroups in the Public School Information System”

We support the original concept of “prohibiting educational institutions or other state agencies from mandatory collection and separation of data from students by subpopulations of national origin or ethnicity”. We believe ethnic subgroup data collection either targeted at Asians or uniformly for all races and ethnicities in primary and secondary education is unnecessary, inappropriate, and harmful.

First, ethnicity specific data collection in school system such as the “All students count” introduced in Rhode Island will not achieve its claimed goal of helping Southeast Asian students who are said to belong to a disadvantaged ethnic group. The collected data is said to be confidential, therefore the teachers will not know which student is from a “disadvantaged ethnicity.” Then there is no pathway to use the data to help these students. Also, in each ethnic group, the education needs and achievements have great in-group variation. For instance, Chinese students are said to have higher average performance than Hmong students. However, the underachieving Chinese students need more help than Hmong students who perform well at school. The education needs in primary and secondary school are individual-specific, not ethnicity-specific.

Second, data collection could lead to a breach of privacy. The Asian population is very small in Connecticut. If an ethnic data disaggregation legislation is implemented, a small population is further broken down into more categories by school district or school. It will result in privacy breaches due to the small number of observations in each of the narrowly defined groups. For instance, assume a school has in total 10 students from a certain ethnic group, and 60% of them receive an unsatisfactory result in a certain test. A person who is familiar with the student body can easily identify the 6 students who have unsatisfactory results by reading the report.
Confidentiality and privacy of test results are breached unintentionally. This same problem applies to other areas of needs, such as students who have mental health needs.

Third, the overemphasis on ethnic difference will lead to ethnic-specific stigma and stereotypes. The data collection and its results on the different “needs” of different ethnic group will result in stigma attached to each ethnic group. For example, some data showed that on average, Chinese have lower English proficiency, this data cannot help the government distinguish the particular Chinese who need language assistance from the Chinese who are native English speakers. Instead, it creates more stereotypes — Chinese Americans and immigrants speak bad English. Also, believing that knowing a person’s ethnicity can predict what a particular individual may need is built on the racist assumption that all the people in the same ethnic group are the same and need the same thing. Resource allocation should be based on need, not assumptions or generalizations about ethnicity.

Fourth, data collection imposes psychological harms to students and parents. Many parents of Asian American children are immigrants. Many of them endured various implicit biases, explicit prejudices, and even outright hatred because of their national or ethnic origin. Also, it takes longer for many Asian immigrants to obtain a green card, which is the only pathway to citizenship and has a country-based quota system. The volumes of applications from Chinese, Indian and Filipino immigrants hit the quota every year. Indian immigrants have the longest queue and waiting time; for many of them, the waiting is more than 10 or even 20 years. Without a green card, immigrants have very limited rights, and the period of waiting is very stressful. If the education system asks nation of origin data, which is the reason for their stressful lived experience, then the parents have a high risk of considering this practice a threat, and this stress will spill over to their children.

Fifth, data collection damages the trusting and collaborative relationship between parents, teachers, and school authorities. The schools and the teachers will perform the role of the data collectors. If the parents consider this data collection as a threat, they may demand the teachers or school authorities to explain. In the current school system, the teachers and school authorities are predominately White and American born, and we believe the current system is unable to answer the questions about the issue of race and “why divide us” to the parents’ satisfaction. The parents may consider the teachers uncaring, incapable, or even racist. Also, the teachers and authorities may disagree with this data collection, but they are not able to withdraw from this practice. It is unnecessary and counterproductive to introduce a political debate on campus about a contested and tension-loaded issues related to race. It is counterproductive to the role of educators and disruptive to the relationship between the parents, teacher, and school authorities.

Last but not least, ethnic data collection makes the American kids fell Un-American. The repeating questions of “where are you really from?” or “where are your parents/grandparents/great grandparents really from?” will eventually tear the American children’s identity apart.
For the well-being of all children and other the stakeholders in the primary and secondary education system, we urge the education committee to report the bill favorably out of the committee, and amend the language to prohibit any type of racial or ethnic subgroup’s data collection.

Thank you for your consideration on this matter.
Sincerely,
Yuan Li