Good afternoon, Senators Slossberg and Boucher, Representatives Fleischmann and Lavielle, and members of the Education Committee. Good Afternoon, my name is Michael Casey and I am a union representative for the Connecticut Education Association. I represent teachers in 10 school districts in the Southeastern part of the State.

Violent, assaultive, and disruptive behavior in our schools is a serious problem that greatly interferes in the ability of our teachers to teach, and students to learn. We are seeing more troubling behaviors, and they are starting at a very young age. It is not uncommon for me to hear of classrooms being evacuated on a regular basis to protect students whilst one of their classmates throws chairs and other dangerous objects around the room, and/or attempts to punch, kick, spit on, or otherwise injure teachers and classmates. In some cases this happens multiple times per week in the same classroom. In addition to the obvious risk of injury, and actual injuries to teachers and students, this behavior decreases instructional time and negatively impacts the ability to provide a safe environment conducive to learning.

Unfortunately, it is often with the least-experienced teachers who do not have tenure, and are therefore fearful of not having their teaching contracts renewed, that the most dangerous and challenging students are placed. That’s because these teachers are not likely to speak up for fear of losing their jobs – and for that reason you are not likely to hear from them directly in this committee.

For example, I have a first year Kindergarten teacher in one of my districts who needs to evacuate her classroom 2-3 times per week to protect her students from a classmate who throws chairs and other objects around the room. The student has hit, kicked and stabbed students and staff. Yet this student, who clearly needs significantly more supports and services, remains in a regular classroom setting where his behavior poses a danger and serious disruption to everyone around him.
This is not a one-size fits all problem. I constantly hear from teachers that when they send a student to the office for disruptive behavior, the student returns a short time later with no or little follow up from the Administrator. I have repeatedly heard from Teachers that their Administrators have said that it’s better for the Administrator to remain the student’s friend than to impose a serious consequence on the student. This undermines the teacher’s authority in the classroom, and results in further disruptive behavior.

The problem has become so prolific in Norwich, that this year when we negotiated our new contract, the Teachers attempted to add language that would require basic protocols to be put in place to help protect teachers and students from the type of dangerous behavior we’ve been discussing. The language simply required that the District provide every teacher at the beginning of the school year with a written protocol that would: 1.) identify which Administrator should be notified if a teacher determines that administrator intervention is appropriate to address student behavior; 2.) designate a location for teachers to send students who are seriously disrupting the classroom; 3.) provide a process to follow to immediately address a situation that poses an imminent danger to students or staff; and 4.) that would provide a process whereby the teacher and Administrator will engage in an interactive discussion within two (2) school days, with the assistance of others, if necessary or desired, to determine how the student’s behavior should be addressed.

Our proposal was simply about having protocols in place to deal with an imminent and potentially dangerous behavioral problem, and it required that there be a conversation between the school Administrator and classroom teacher to discuss how the behavior might best be addressed. It did NOT require a particular consequence. But even this benign language, which was intended to facilitate open communication and a team approach was vehemently opposed by the Administration and never made into our contract.

It would be wonderful if the Legislature required districts to put in place something like these simple protocols to help protect students and staff from dangerous conduct; and to promote dialogue between administration and classroom teachers to start addressing these problems. It would also be helpful to put in place adequate measures to identify these behaviors at an early stage, and provide the resources needed get these kids the interventions and support that they need.

Thank you.