TESTIMONY OF ROBYN KAPLAN-CHO

CONNECTICUT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
CONCERNING SENATE BILL 453

AN ACT CONCERNING CLASSROOM SAFETY AND DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

MARCH 14, 2018

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Robyn Kaplan-Cho and I have been on staff with the Connecticut Education Association representing active and retired teachers across the state of Connecticut for over 23 years.

I am here today to tell you that there is a crisis in many schools across Connecticut related to teacher and student safety. And although it might seem incredulous, the majority of the most serious safety issues are occurring in elementary classrooms including in pre-kindergarten. As I travel across the state and meet with our members, they tell me their heartbreaking stories. Here are a few:

"Sometimes as I am driving to school, I actually hope that I will get into an accident—nothing major but maybe a fender bender—so I do not have to face the physical attacks for yet another day."

"A very disruptive third-grader urinates on me every time I try to control his temper tantrums. But it's OK because my husband works at home nearby so he just brings me a change of clothes whenever it happens."

"After my repeated requests for help from my supervisor because a very large high school student keeps attacking me, she ordered me a football pro shield blocker on Amazon to protect myself."

"Prior to becoming a teacher, I worked in an adult psychiatric facility. I felt safer there than I do in the elementary school where I now work."
And let me also share some of the comments made by administrators to our members who have sought their support and intervention:

"I honestly don’t know what to do – I am getting kicked and scratched too."

"Wear a baseball hat and put your hair in a ponytail so she can’t pull your hair out so easily."

"Wear a Kevlar sleeve so that your skin will not be broken when he bites you."

I could go on and on but in the interest of time I will not. I hope you are starting to see a clearer picture of what so many teachers are facing when they go to work every day. And if teachers are facing this, then we know that the students they teach are experiencing the very same level of trauma and academic disruption.

Why is this happening? It is the perfect storm of circumstances:

- Very tight school budgets so there is not enough funding for additional staffing and necessary student supports.
- A pervasive administrative philosophy that there should be no actual consequences for disruptive students so students who are referred to the administration are often sent right back to the classroom within 10 to 15 minutes.
- Administrators discourage teachers from reporting these incidents and often blame the teachers for the students’ uncontrollable behavior, combined with the reality that most elementary teachers are women and they are less likely to complain about anything or demand help.
- An absence of physical space in elementary schools where these students can go to calm down and receive support from trained personnel. It is important to note that this problem has been exacerbated by the new law that prohibits out of school suspension for any students in grade 2 and under except in the most extreme cases. Because there is nowhere for these students to go to calm down and receive more therapeutic support, if the administrator is busy or not present in the building, they are often left sitting with the school secretary in the office for a few minutes before they are sent back to the classroom.

But it cannot persist. We have a joint obligation to ensure that teachers and students go to schools that are safe from physical assault and conducive to learning. If a classroom has to be cleared several times per week because a student is having a meltdown and throwing chairs and pulling down bulletin boards, none of those students, including the disruptive one, is learning. Just last week a teacher told me that from the time the tantrum began and she had to quickly remove the rest of the class to another safe place until the class was able to return to her room, three hours had elapsed. Another teacher told me that she is a member of the crisis intervention team in her school (she was chosen since she is the reading specialist and does not have to abandon a room full of students when she is called into action) and her crisis team was called into action over 100 times in a span of just two months.
Our teachers and students need your help and this bill provides a starting point. It adopts the recommended staffing ratio for social workers: one social worker for every 250 students. Frankly, that is just one recommendation. It also could include additional behaviorists, school counselors, and other staff trained in behavior interventions. This bill also requires every school to include consideration of daily classroom safety as part of its school climate plan and committees, and also requires parents of the aggressor and those students who witnessed an incident to be notified.

Please support this bill so we can begin to implement measures to protect teachers and students from what have become serious daily incidents of educational disruption and physical attacks. We need to send a message that every teacher deserves a safe workplace and every student deserves a safe and supportive learning environment.

Thank you.