Written Testimony of
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Before the Education Committee

SB 455 AAC Minority Teacher Recruitment and Retention

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Good afternoon,++ Senators Slossberg and Boucher, Representatives Fleischmann and Lavielle, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Mia Dimbo, and I am a teacher in Bridgeport Public Schools and a member of Connecticut’s Minority Teacher Recruitment Policy Oversight Council. My testimony is my own and not that of the Council or Bridgeport Public Schools.

I oppose SB 455.

This bill is so bad in so many ways that it is hard to decide where to start. It is a slap in the face to the decades of struggle that people of color have spent overcoming the stigma of not being as good as our non-minority colleagues. This bill reduces professional standards under the pretext of luring more minorities into becoming classroom teachers. I am insulted, as are all teaching professionals who overcame socioeconomic barriers to prove they are as capable as their colleagues—who were fortunate not to have to overcome demoralizing and unnecessary hurdles. This bill would undo decades of labors by minorities to prove themselves over and over again.

There is a difference between removing requirements that create unnecessary hurdles versus lowering professional standards. Recently, the Connecticut State Department of Education was correct to right-size certification requirements to be the same as those commonly used across the country. Before that, Connecticut had excessive testing requirements, which served only to increase the profits of testing companies.

It is obvious that the intent of this bill is to make teacher certification more dependent on who you know than what you know. Who gets to decide vague requirements such as equivalent education; relevant subject; evidence of effectiveness? Would you allow this level of subjectivity in a physician’s certification? Should butchers be given a shortcut to becoming a surgeon? While I think a butcher is a respectable career choice, I do not want a butcher operating on me because someone decided they had equivalent and relevant experience.

Certainly, the state’s business-run charter management organizations welcome this bill. In some business-run charters, more than 50 percent of teaching staff is uncertified, which is well more than the legal maximum of 40 percent. Furthermore, teacher turnover in the state’s business-run charters is excessively high. In traditional public schools across the U.S., the average teacher has 14 years of
experience, while in charters schools most leave within three years.\(^1\) Turnover is so high in business-run charters that new hires are being asked to sign a contract committing them to five years.

This is one of the many insidious ways that business-run charters extract profit from taxpayer monies. They hire unqualified teaching staff to deliver scripted lessons and zero-tolerance discipline policies, pay them low wages, overwork them, and repeat this cycle every time one of them resigns because they are tired of being exploited. This bill would allow these unfortunate people to become certified teachers even though they do not have a single college-level course in teaching. We need to increase opportunities for people of color to become teaching professionals and not lower standards because some believe minorities cannot cut the mustard and want to profit from it.

I offer the following alternatives to encourage more minorities to become classroom teachers in Connecticut:

- Increase the number of high-level minority decision-makers in the Connecticut State Department of Education to reflect the demographics of the state’s public schools. People who have the same lived experiences of our minority students will make more effective decisions with tangibly improved outcomes.

- Create satellite campuses of historically black colleges in our urban centers to attract minority students from across the U.S. to Connecticut. For example, there could be Morehouse College (in Atlanta, GA) at UConn-Hartford, where Morehouse students complete the last two years of their teaching program. This could also be done with the University of Puerto Rico and universities in Mexico, Chile, and elsewhere.

- Target higher education support to attract students of color into teaching programs and enhance programs that help them persist to graduation.

- Establish grow-your-own programs that provide community members with pathways to teaching that do not lower standards and give high school students an early start on college.

- Provide housing assistance to attract teachers of color from areas of the country with a lower cost of living.

It is important to emphasize that increasing the number of teachers of color is not only about recruitment. We need to do a better job retaining them. So much of the focus is on recruitment that too little is spent on cultural awareness for both students and staff. We must make all our schools welcoming for everyone, regardless of where they come from.

Thank you for your time and interest.

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\(^1\) http://www.kappanonline.org/burnout-factories-challenge-retaining-great-teachers-charter-schools/