

Testimony on SB 459 and HB 5220

Connecticut General Assembly:

Education Committee Hearing

March 14, 2018

Members of the CT General Assembly's Education Committee:

I am Gary S. Mala, Executive Director of EASTCONN, one of Connecticut's six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs). As you know, RESCs are not-for-profit, fee-for-service public education agencies established to provide school-based partnerships to provide high-quality, cost-effective education services to schools, districts, and communities. Each of our agencies has successfully and effectively assisted school districts in our regions with fingerprinting candidates, employees, preservice individuals and volunteers for many years.

I support the legislative efforts to increase student safety and school security. Unfortunately, a string of recent policy and procedural changes implemented by the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP) related to the processing of fingerprints have had significant, negative impacts on school districts. These impacts are financial for individuals seeking employment and/or placement in our state's public schools, including but not limited to substitute teachers, student teachers, school volunteers (frequently parents of students) and preservice internships. Additionally, these changes have caused excessive delays in the hiring process and have created an unexplainable backlog that has slowed what was a highly successful and efficient system significantly. The newly revised system is simply a mistake. It is too expensive for the candidates who are now being required to be fingerprinted in each district in which they desire to work and/or volunteer. Fees range as high as \$250 per district.

The recent DESPP changes have undone a regional process and system of fingerprinting that had been successfully implemented by the state established RESCs and has run smoothly and without incident for many years. This contradicts your commitment to promoting regionalism. Prior to the recent changes, a candidate could be fingerprinted at one of the six RESCs in Connecticut and the RESCs could share the results with districts state-wide. RESCs have a long-standing history of conducting fingerprinting services successfully, and our school districts trust our ability to support them in this process. RESCs have already invested in the equipment and/or staff to perform this service and will be more efficient and cost-effective if given an opportunity.

As stated above, these changes have created inefficiencies and increased the challenges of securing substitute teachers, supporting preservice teachers and interns, encouraging volunteers, and increased the barriers to entry-level jobs in education.

I support SB 459 and the proposed return to the centralized regional system, which RESCs have been allowed to maintain in the past and permits an individual's background check to be used in multiple school districts.

I would welcome the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with DESPP to develop policies and procedures that both meet the requirements of their system and work for school districts. However, I am concerned that the intent of HB-5220, which had a hearing before the Public Safety Committee, is to allow DESPP to engage a private third-party vendor, outside of the RESCs. This would eventually take over the process of obtaining fingerprints and managing the lists of background check results for school districts. I would be opposed to that change.

I would urge you to consider legislation that would require DESPP to work cooperatively with the CT RESC Alliance on a solution that will reduce the financial burden on the candidates, school districts and municipalities, and most importantly, ensures an efficient and effective process for fingerprinting and background checks that will make our schools more secure.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gary S. Mala
Executive Director
EASTCONN