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Written Testimony of
Ray Rossomando
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Before the Education Committee

SB 456 Assistance to School Districts that Enroll Students from Puerto Rico Who Have Been Displaced by Hurricane Maria

HB 5444 AAC Revisions to the Student Data Privacy Act

SB 459 AAC The Regional Processing and Retention of Fingerprint Records

March 14, 2008

Good afternoon Senators Slossberg and Boucher, Representatives Fleischmann and Lavielle, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, and I am the Director of Policy, Research, and Government Relations for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA). CEA represents active and retired public school teachers from over 150 school districts across the state.

SB 456

CEA supports SB 456.

SB 456 provides flexibility to school districts that are serving the estimated 1,500 children that have come to Connecticut from Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. While we commend the committee for recognizing the unique and urgent needs of these children, we also know that this flexibility will not be enough.

Hurricane Maria devastated lives, families, the economy, and community in Puerto Rico. The children affected by this disaster have experienced a severe trauma, coupled by displacement and uncertainty. The educational needs for these children go beyond classroom space and include English language assistance, access to social workers, trauma-informed instructional practices, and potentially additional aid to provide for daily necessities.

CEA urges the legislature to consider these additional needs as it determines how best it can serve the children of Puerto Rico who are now the children of Connecticut.

HB 544

CEA supports HB 5444 as written.

CEA commends the work of the Commission on Education Technology and the development of a uniform Terms of Service agreement that is proposed in Section 1 of the bill. We support provisions in the bill ensuring that parents have access to plain language information about data privacy laws and are informed about the collection of student data by third parties. We also believe that the exclusions proposed in the bill for emergency circumstances are sensible.

CEA believes that data on students, and with it teacher and classroom data should be protected from breach, abuse, and misuse. A couple of years ago, CEA sought to protect classroom information from the dangers of insecurity and negligence after incidents of loose data arose in Connecticut when third party contractors provided services without paying heed to data security.

Additionally, the reality of large data breaches were commonplace in headlines, underscoring the need to protect students and school staff from the risks of loose data. Yet laws protecting information had not evolved with the times.

Federal student privacy law (FERPA) has gone unchanged since it was created in 1974 to protect information about students that was slipped into filing cabinets – the storied “permanent record” that held the infractions of our youth. This was 10 years before the Apple Macintosh was unveiled and 20 years before Mosaic and AOL expanded Internet usage beyond a few folks in higher education and the military.

This committee has done an admirable job plugging data privacy holes created by rapid technological advances, profiteering service providers, and Congressional inaction. Together with a handful of other states, Connecticut is setting the standard for online protection.

Yet there are a small number of large online companies arguing that compliance is too difficult and that Connecticut should simply roll back its law and defer to FERPA – a law created before most people had touch-tone dialing in their homes. They are using their power to force a stand-off between compliance and the educational needs of students. With this bill, you come down on the side of the children and we support you on this.

SB 459

CEA Supports SB 459.

CEA supports the security and background check protections that have been put into place in Connecticut’s schools. Current practices that require substitute teachers and other staff seeking employment across multiple districts to be fingerprinted multiple times are cumbersome, costly, and inefficient. CEA supports provisions in this bill to make the fingerprinting and background check process more centralized and efficient, while preserving their precautionary value.

Thank you.