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TESTIMONY OF ROBYN KAPLAN-CHO
CONNECTICUT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION (CEA)
CONCERNING RAISED BILL 7110
AN ACT CONCERNING ENHANCED CLASSROOM SAFETY AND SCHOOL CLIMATE
BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 22, 2019

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez and members of the Education Committee. My name is Robyn Kaplan-Cho and I have been on staff with the Connecticut Education Association (CEA) representing teachers across the state of Connecticut for over 24 years.

I am here today to tell you that there is a crisis in many schools across Connecticut related to teacher and student safety that is having extremely troubling consequences – a significant loss of learning time, young children experiencing increased trauma, and staff members, who incidentally, are almost entirely female, suffering physical harm. 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 heartbreaking stories. Here are a few:

"I have to clear my classroom on a regular basis because a disregulated student is throwing books and chairs and destroying the classroom. In order to keep the other children in the room safe, another colleague had to take the rest of my students out into the hall where they waited for over an hour until it was safe to return to my room. One day it took over 3 hours from the time the students cleared from my room until they were safe to return.

"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 because at least there were protections in place for the staff and other patients."

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 she bites you."

I think the one story that stays with me the most was an incident where a student in first grade was repeatedly disruptive. The administrator would talk to him in his office following each incident and then promptly send him back to his classroom without providing any of the supports and interventions he clearly needed. One day, after he left the room to see the administrator, another student in the class saw the administrator walking him back into the room so he ran to the block the door, begging his teacher not to let him back in since they had just settled into their reading circle and he didn't want it to abruptly end yet again.

I could share many more equally disturbing stories but in the interest of time I will not. But I hope you are starting to see a clearer picture of what so many teachers and students are facing when they enter their schools every day. There is much talk lately of the impact of trauma on students. These disruptive and sometimes violent events in school are causing trauma.

House Bill 7110 is our attempt to change this. This bill sets forth protocols to ensure that classrooms are safe places where uninterrupted learning can take place and students get the help they need. Because at the end of the day, these disruptive and sometimes injurious incidents are just that – a cry for help. If this bill fails to pass, it will simply mean more of the status quo – disrupted learning, clearing of classrooms, and a serious lack of needed supports and interventions for children in crisis. Is the status quo acceptable to you?

If not, 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 injury. We need to take action to ensure that every teacher arrives each morning to a safe workplace and that every student arrives each morning to a safe and supportive learning environment.

Finally, CEA supports the recommendation made by Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK-CT) to include in this bill a requirement that any student who is temporarily removed for disruptive or injurious behavior must be referred to a PPT or for an evaluation if he or she is not yet an identified child. We also support their proposal contained in Raised Bill 6822 which protects teachers from reprisal in any form for expressing their professional opinion in a PPT or pre-PPT meeting.

Thank you.