



Testimony of
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Before the Education Committee

**Re: SB 1021 AAC A Comprehensive Community Schools Pilot Program
HB 7312 AA Establishing a Task Force to Study Issues Relating to Parental Involvement with
Students**

March 13, 2019

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, and I serve as the Director of Policy, Research, and Government Relations for the Connecticut Education Association (CEA), an organization representing active and retired teachers from over 150 school districts across Connecticut.

CEA Supports HB 7312, which would establish a task force on parent engagement. CEA has been working on more inclusive parent engagement strategies, including the provision of training for “Parent-Teacher Home Visits” – a program that is being piloted in our state. We are also working to engage parents in the promotion of community school strategies, which are reflected in SB 1021 as well.

CEA strongly supports SB 1021 and thanks the committee for raising the bill for consideration. SB 1021 proposes a comprehensive community schools pilot program. If enacted, this bill will kick-start remarkable transformations in schools serving our neediest students. You may have heard of the term “Community School” and maybe even visited schools in Connecticut that claim to be one. However, the term has been used fairly loosely. Today I am sharing with you a vision of a comprehensive, transformative community school that is envisioned in this bill.

The comprehensive community schools model creates an empowering environment for parents and community partners. Together with educators, stakeholders determine the unique needs of students in their school and identify the community resources available to meet those needs.

In a comprehensive community school, there is a designated community school resource coordinator who maps resources in a community and builds long-term partnerships with providers, charities, and other partners like local businesses. The coordinator continually works

with parents, community partners, and school personnel to identify challenges students face and build problem solving teams to overcome them. It is this coordinator position that is key to a school successfully implementing this comprehensive strategy.

However, with limited resources in our neediest districts, designating or creating a community school coordinator position can be difficult given competing needs. SB 1021 would create a matching grant that would serve as an incentive for districts to establish such a position. The position could also be supported with Title 1 funds as permitted in the Every Student Succeeds Act.

This investment will bring immediate paybacks to the districts that participate, allowing coordinators to marshal existing community resources to the students who need them most. The results in schools that follow this model have been astounding. Some examples of this success from across the country are described briefly here.

Cincinnati has converted 43 of its 55 schools to the community model since 2006. Their black/white achievement gap has decreased from 14.5% to 4.5%. Graduation rates increased by 30 points and nearly two-thirds of the district's students go on to college.

Ronald Reagan High School (Austin, TX) converted in 2009. Since then, enrollment has more than doubled, attendance rose from 88% to 95%, and graduation rates increased from 48% to 90%. Additionally, 200 students now earn dual college credit, when none did in 2009. Austin has since expanded the model to other schools in the district.

Wolfe Street Academy Elementary School (Baltimore, MD) implemented a community schools model in 2005. Since then chronic absenteeism dropped from 10% to less than 2%. After school program participation increased from 50% to 84%, and student mobility dropped from 46.6% to 8.8%.

These statistics are remarkable, but even more remarkable is the feel of a community school. Not too long ago, I joined a team from Bridgeport to visit the **Bronx's Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School (FLHFHS)**, which is located in the nation's poorest congressional district. Together with the New York Children's Aid Society, the community served by Fannie Lou Hamer adopted a community schools model in 2006. Thirteen years later, FLHFHS continues to have a vibrant and welcoming environment. Students are clearly engaged in innovative projects and individualized studies enabled through the school's participation in the New York Portfolio Assessment Consortium – a project driven by assessment of real learning that does not rely on standardized testing. FLHFHS is a testament to the power of including the community in the direction of its school.

In Connecticut, this work is just beginning in some of our cities. One of CEA's local affiliates, the Bridgeport Education Association, is leading an effort by reaching out to families in the Harding High School community, including its feeder elementary and middle schools.

The Bridgeport Educational Alliance for Public Schools (BEAPS), was recently founded to initiate community school strategies in Bridgeport. CEA, along with support from the National

Education Association (NEA), has been working with the Bridgeport Education Association (a local affiliate of the CEA and NEA affiliate), to fund this project.

BEAPS, through their community organizer, (Shamare Holmes, who is also testifying today on this bill) has been working with parents, educators, and local organizations to identify challenges facing students and creating coalitions to address them. Through community conversations called BEAPS SPEAKS, parents have focused on issues of safety and programming. The issues raised in the community are then topics for potential solutions among problem solving teams that include educators and community providers.

Ms. Holmes's work, with assistance from students and teachers, began with door-to-door canvassing and outreach to parents. It then evolved to parent and community meetings, all with the goal of tackling common challenges identified by the community, including language acquisition for parents or transportation for students. Turning this work into action to overcome identified challenges is the next phase of this work. Passage of SB 1021 would not only ensure that this happens, but also enable this strategy to become a deeper, more sustained practice.

Among the important considerations in this bill is the unsung value of Connecticut's Family Resource Centers (FRCs), which are referenced in the bill. FRCs do commendable work and successfully connect services to children, further enabling them to succeed in school. However, FRCs tend to be stand-alone programs simply housed in schools, with too little coordination with the decisions made by school leaders. In a comprehensive community school, FRCs are not merely tenants in a school, but an integral part of the community school implementation team. This example of enhanced coordination is among the added benefits of pursuing a comprehensive community school model.

CEA believes strongly in this model and is happy to follow-up with additional materials. We recommend the following organizations for further information on Community School models.

The Center for Popular Democracy

<https://populardemocracy.org/campaign/advocating-community-schools>

(Also see the attached one sheet community schools description.)

Institute for Educational Leadership, Coalition for Community Schools

<http://www.communityschools.org/>

Teachers Policy Institute (TPI): <http://www.teachers-policy-institute.org/>

TPI Forum Report:

http://www.teachers-policy-institute.org/uploads/7/3/7/5/73758795/community_conversations_symposium_report_final.pdf

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: TRANSFORMING STRUGGLING SCHOOLS INTO THRIVING SCHOOLS



COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY to bring together the resources of school, family, and community in order to make schools stronger and help young people thrive. With a century history in the United States, Community Schools now serve over 5 million students in approximately 5,000 schools across the country. While community schools might take different approaches, these schools generally employ whole-child, research-based strategies and elevate innovative and holistic practices in order to achieve results that go beyond test scores. In fact, when community schools are able to employ the multiple strategies outlined in this document, their results can be sustainably transformational: increasing school attendance, decreasing suspensions and expulsions, creating healthy and safe communities, and improving academic outcomes.

SIX STRATEGIES THAT ALLOW FOR GREATER STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING ^a

1. Curricula that are engaging, culturally relevant, and challenging. Schools offer a robust selection of classes and after-school programs in the arts, languages, and ethnic studies, as well as Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses. Also offered are services for English Language Learners and special education students, GED preparation programs, and job training. Pedagogy is student-centered.

2. An emphasis on high-quality teaching, not on high-stakes testing. Assessments are used to help teachers meet the needs of students. Educators have a real voice in professional development. Professional development is high-quality and ongoing, and includes strengthening understanding of, and professional alignment with, the Community School strategy.

3. Wrap-around supports and opportunities such as health care, eye care, and social and emotional services that support academics. These services are available before, during, and after school, and are provided year-round to the full community. Community partners are accountable and culturally competent. The supports are aligned to the classroom using thorough and continuous data collection, analysis, and reflection. Space for these services is allocated within the building or within walking distance.

4. Positive discipline practices, such as restorative justice and social and emotional learning supports, are stressed so that students can grow and contribute to the school community and beyond. School safety and positive school climate are achieved through these mechanisms. Suspensions and harsh punishments are eliminated or greatly reduced.

5. Authentic parent and community engagement is promoted so the full community actively participates in planning and decision making. This process recognizes the link between the success of the school and the development of the community as a whole.

6. Inclusive school leadership who are committed to making the Community School strategy integral to the school's mandate and functioning. They ensure that the Community School Coordinator is a part of the leadership team and that a Community School Committee which includes parents, community partners, school staff, youth, and other stakeholders that are representatives of the school's various constituencies—has a voice in the planning and implementation of the strategy.

The six strategies we recommend are aligned with decades of academic research on successful schools. Research has found that deeper learning can be achieved through authentic curricula and assessments, wrap-around services that address student social and emotional needs, and supportive, skill-building environments for educators. Community schools have been found to impact not just test scores, but also attendance and family engagement and a multitude of other indicators.

THE MECHANISMS BY WHICH COMMUNITY SCHOOLS CAN ACHIEVE TRANSFORMATIONAL, POSITIVE CHANGE

Transformational Community Schools achieve success by implementing the above strategies through the following mechanisms:

1. An asset and needs **assessment** of and by both school and community;
2. A strategic **plan** that defines how educators and community partners will use all available assets to meet specific student needs and get better results;
3. The engagement of **partners** who bring assets and expertise to help implement the building blocks of Community Schools
4. A Community School **Coordinator** whose job is to facilitate the development and implementation of the strategic plan in collaboration with school and community members/partners, and to ensure alignment of solutions to needs.

^a Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools—a national grouping of community organizing groups, teacher unions and policy organizations representing over 7 million members—evolved the six strategies of successful Community Schools to clarify a set of aspirational goals for all Community Schools