Testimony of Rosalie Witt

In support of

HB7250 AN ACT CONCERNING THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PLAY.

Education Committee – Public Hearing, March 6, 2019

Dear Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez and all of the esteemed members of the Education Committee,

I am a parent of a second grader in 2 public school. I have been an early educator for the last 19 years. Both my undergraduate and graduate work focused on early childhood regular and special education. My current roles include being an Adjunct Professor at Norwalk Community College in the Early Childhood Department, a trainer for the Office of Early Childhood through Cooperative Educations Services, one of Connecticut’s local Regional Education Service Centers and a consultant to preschools in the Fairfield County area. I volunteer my personal time as the Co-President of the local chapter of the Connecticut Association for the Education of Young Children. Today I am writing to you in support of the Raised Senate Bill HB7250 - An Act Concerning the Improvement of Child Development Through Play.

Research on early brain development teaches us that very early on children need the opportunity to be immersed in environments that provide for active self-directed learning. Learning and life happen within the context of home, community and school. There are numerous experiences in life that contribute to this process. One of those experiences for young children includes the time to participate in unstructured play.

One of my favorite quotes about play is from Albert Einstein: Play is the highest form of research. I have experienced first-hand the research that children can accomplish when play is supported through a developmentally appropriate environment. Unstructured play experiences coupled with open-ended play materials like boxes, blocks, and loose parts provide endless opportunities for children to not only construct their own learning but also learn vital skills they need to succeed in life. When children are empowered to play, they take ownership of the process and in turn become much more vested in what they are creating. Learning also happens in this way. While society puts a heavy emphasis on academics the truth is there is nothing that is more important than each child’s social and emotional development. Self-efficacy, the ability to problem solve, collaborate, self-regulate, have empathy and make decisions are 21st century skills and they are fostered through play.

What is most beneficial about play is that it is universal. No matter where you come from or what your culture is play is an innate ability that all children possess. The work of Dr. Peter Gray, who the committee heard from on February 14th, during a hearing for another bill, has researched this fact and has documented the rise in mental health issues with the decline of play. There are children in both urban and suburban cities in Connecticut that
are suffering daily because of the lack of play in their school day. In order to meet unattainable goals, set forth by state standards and mandates, children are being subjected to teaching practices that go against their biological make up. With a focus on just math and reading we are missing the whole child. If you reference the Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards you will learn more about what it means to nurture and serve the whole child. Only in this way are we going to educate children. Even those children in urban settings who enter Kindergarten behind need to be nurtured in all the domains of learning. They actually need is most of all.

My son is diagnosed with ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder and regularly experiences anxiety because of school expectations and test taking. He is seven years old and needs to see a psychiatrist and take medication in order to make it through his school day. This anecdote alone should give you pause and think to yourselves, “What are we doing to children?” and “How did we get here?” I experience these very thoughts every single day. As a parent I agonize every single day over how to support my son. I am privileged to have insurance and the means to give him access to doctors, therapists and medicine. What about all the countless families that don't have my good fortune?

More unstructured play time is something that doesn’t have a cost associated with it. Administrators needs permission to begin to explore how to fit more play into their schedule. There are pockets of school districts that have begun to experiment with it. Below I have provided you Ted Talk of a superintendent from Long Island that has fit in 40 minutes of recess and has the data to prove the positive effects of this change in schedule. Play is a right of young children. Some teachers use it as a means of disciplining children and take it away for inappropriate behavior. The shame in this is that children are acting out because they don’t have enough free play and then they get punished further for it and lose their 20 minutes. This is a modern-day tragedy that is happening every day in schools across Connecticut. Please make this be the last year recess can be taken away.

Below I have provided resources and articles to help share the message that I am trying to convey today. We want the same thing. For children in the Connecticut to thrive in school and in life. It is what keeps us going and secures our future. No matter what we think we know there are always new and different perspectives available for consideration. Research leads to innovation. When we know better, we do better. Today, I ask for you to learn about the needs of the whole child. To view play as not a waste of time, but as an essential part of the day that is going to make instruction time that much more fruitful for our youngest learners.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours respectfully,
Rosalie Witt
15 Snowberry Lane
Wilton, CT 06897
Rwitt17@gmail.com
CT Early Learning and Development Standards
*I implore you to reach out to Beth Bye our new Commissioner at the Office of Early Childhood. She can and will help to guide you and lead our state in the right direction in regards to how to educate our youngest and most vulnerable children.

The Need for Pretend Play in Child Development

Let the Kids Learn Through Play

We Need to Make Kindergarten Engaging Again

Why PEAS Are the Key to a Successful Education | Dr. Michael Hynes | TEDxAdelphiUniversity